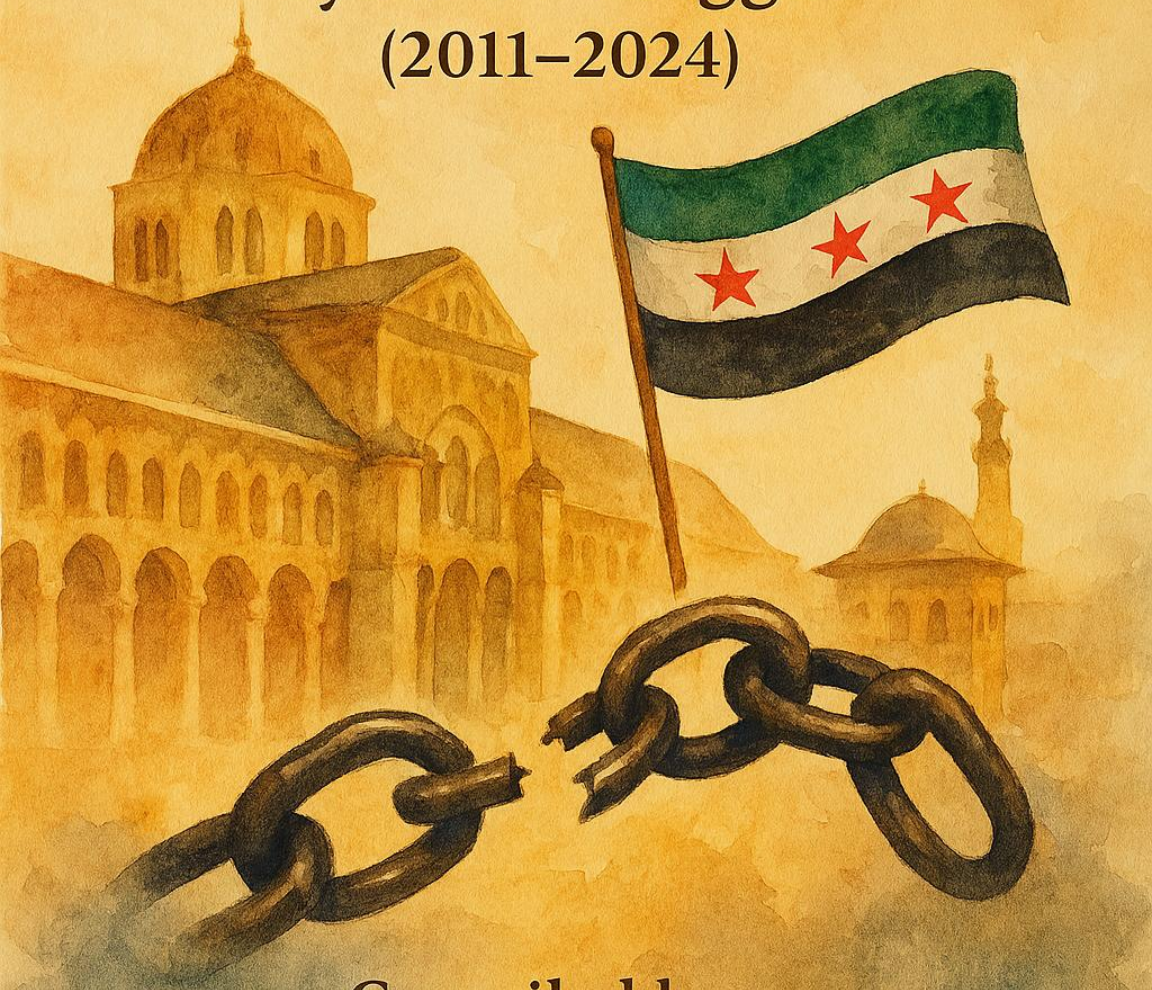
FROM UPRISING TO LIBERATION

Syria's Struggle (2011–2024)



Compiled by

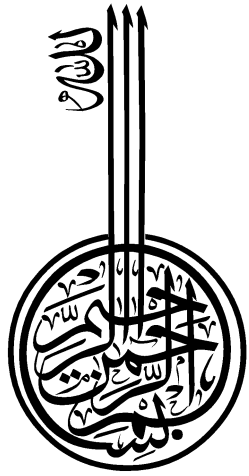
A. R. Kelani

From Uprising to Liberation: Syria's Struggle

(2011–2024)

Complied by

Abdulrahman Kelani



To the soul of my brother, Muhammad Yahya Kelani,
who breathed his last in the dungeons of tyrants—unbroken, unbent.
To my cousin and brother by milk, Raghdan Taqi,
felled by the treacherous hand of sectarian hate.

To every heart that stopped beating in the shadows of injustice,
in the cold, silent prisons of oppression and deceit.
To the martyrs of Syria—men, women, and children—
whose blood wrote verses of freedom upon the earth.

To the heroes who rose to reclaim the land and restore human dignity.
To the grieving mothers and fathers
who kissed the foreheads of their slain,
yet stood tall for the revolution's sacred cause.

To the generations yet to come—
guardians of soil, of memory, of honor,
bearers of a homeland reborn.

To the blessed land of al-Shām,
cradle of Prophets, fortress of the faithful,
and beating heart of our dreams—

I offer this humble work,
a tribute etched in love, grief, and unyielding hope.

This book is not merely a chronicle of events; it is an attempt to understand—to reflect, to interpret, and to draw lessons from the greatest uprising of the 21st century. It is a call to the free across the world to continue the journey, and a reminder to all nations that victory—however long delayed—is inevitable.

Contents

Introduction

From beneath the rubble and the ruins of shattered cities, Syria emerged in December 2024 bearing the scars of thirteen years of suffering and resilience—and carrying the banner of a long-awaited victory. This triumph was not the result of a passing moment, but the culmination of a long, painful journey that began with the first cries for freedom in Daraa during the spring of 2011. What started as a peaceful uprising quickly became a moral and political earthquake that shook the region—and resonated across the world.

The Syrian revolution was the product of decades of repression, brutal security control, and economic marginalization, carried out by a sectarian authoritarian regime under the Assad family. Since the Baʿath Party seized power in 1963—and especially after Hafez al-Assad tightened his grip in 1970—Syria was transformed into a vast prison. Dissenting voices were silenced, and the institutions of the state were reshaped to serve a narrow sectarian project designed to ensure the regime's survival.

Despite its loud proclamations of Arab unity and resistance, the regime's violent authoritarian nature was clear to anyone who looked closely. When the Arab Spring swept across the region, Syrians saw a historic opportunity to voice their longing for freedom, dignity, and justice—rights denied to them for generations.

But the road ahead was brutal. The regime responded to peaceful demonstrations with bullets and bombs. Syrians soon found themselves facing a ruthless alliance: the Assad regime, backed by Iranian militias, Russian airpower, the eerie silence of Western governments, and the watchful eye of Israel—content to see Syria weakened and its northern front quieted for decades to come.

Yet the revolution did not die. It took root in the hearts of the defiant, echoed in the voices of exiles, filled the tents of refugee camps,

and rose in the cries of journalists and activists abroad. It lived on in the chants of worshippers and the battle cries of fighters defending the last free zones of Idlib.

This book presents a historical and analytical account of the Syrian uprising—from its first sparks to the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in late 2024, and the beginning of a new chapter in Syria's modern history. It follows the country's dramatic transformation: from peaceful protests to armed resistance, from the fragmentation of the opposition to foreign interventions, from devastation to the fragile beginnings of renewal.

It also sheds light on the immense crimes committed by the regime and its allies—and the unbearable cost paid by the Syrian people. The book explores the tragedy of the detainees and the disappeared, the destruction of cities, and the forced displacement of millions.

Yet this is not just a chronicle of events. It is an effort to understand the roots of the catastrophe, to analyze its complexity, and to explore the future of Syria after tyranny: reconstruction, national reconciliation, and the building of new institutions rooted in justice and unity. At its heart, it is a tribute to a people who believed in their freedom, paid dearly for it, and now seek to shape a future with unshakable resolve.

With the fall of a regime once thought invincible, Syrians and Arabs alike are left asking a profound question: Will the journey end at the gates of Damascus, or will the banner of liberation continue its path toward Jerusalem—where the fire of struggle still burns, waiting for those who dare to carry it forward?

Prelude

Syria from the Ottoman Era to the Rise of Hafez al-Assad (1516–1970)

I. The Long Ottoman Era (1516–1918)

The Incorporation of Syria into the Ottoman Empire

Following the pivotal Battle of Marj Dābiq in August 1516, the Ottoman Empire swept into the Levant, ending centuries of Mamluk control. Syria became a province within one of the largest empires in history, stretching across three continents. Ottoman authorities reorganized the region into administrative provinces (Vilayat), with Damascus established as the central capital of Greater Syria. Provinces such as Aleppo and Beirut emerged as key regional centers.[1]

The new imperial structure brought relative administrative order, but rural areas in particular endured severe economic strain. Harsh taxation and the concentration of land in the hands of powerful local elites led to growing inequality. Rebellions frequently erupted in the countryside as peasants resisted oppressive governors and rapacious tax collectors.[2]

Religious and Cultural Life

Despite the socio-economic struggles, Syria experienced a flourishing of religious and scholarly activity under Ottoman rule. Damascus rose to prominence as a center of Islamic education, housing

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[1] James L. Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: A History,* Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 53–60.

[2] Hussein Ali Mahfoudh, *Syria in the Twentieth Century,* Dar al-Shorouk, 2002, pp. 15–20.

renowned madrasas and Sufi lodges. Sufi brotherhoods like the Naqshbandis and Qadiris played influential roles in religious life.[3]

By the late 19th century, however, Ottoman control over the Arab provinces weakened. Reformist intellectuals—many influenced by developments in Egypt and Europe—began advocating for Arab cultural revival and autonomy. The 1908 ascension of the Committee of Union and Progress in Istanbul intensified tensions, as the new rulers pursued aggressive Turkification policies that alienated Arab elites and widened the rift between Arab identity and Ottoman allegiance.[4]

II. World War I and the Collapse of Ottoman Rule (1914–1918)

Syria was drawn into the First World War as part of the Ottoman alliance with the Central Powers. The war years brought immense suffering—widespread famine, forced military conscription, and economic devastation. British naval blockades choked supply lines, leading to catastrophic food shortages that decimated communities in Syria and Mount Lebanon. Ottoman military authorities, especially under the harsh rule of Jamal Pasha, implemented brutal measures against dissent and resistance in the Arab provinces.[5]

In 1916, Sharif Hussein of Mecca launched the Arab Revolt against Ottoman authority, bolstered by British promises of postwar Arab independence. His son, Prince Faisal, led the military campaign in coordination with British intelligence officer T.E. Lawrence (later immortalized as "Lawrence of Arabia"), striking strategic blows in the

[3] Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939*, Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 38–50

[4] Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945*, (Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 22.

[5] James L. Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: A History*, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 79–83.

Hejaz and pushing north toward Syria.[6] Meanwhile, British imperial forces advanced through the Sinai Peninsula and into Palestine.

The symbolic end of Ottoman rule in the Levant came in October 1918, when Arab and British forces entered Damascus. This moment, celebrated as the dawn of Arab independence, raised hopes for the establishment of a unified Arab state stretching from the Hejaz to the Levant. The establishment of the short-lived Arab administration in Damascus, with Faisal as its leader, appeared to fulfill the promises made during wartime correspondence between Sharif Hussein and British officials.[7]

Yet these hopes were tragically misplaced. Even before the Arab Revolt began, Britain and France had already agreed to divide the Arab territories of the Ottoman Empire under the secret Sykes–Picot Agreement of 1916, effectively betraying their promises to the Arabs.[8] This duplicity would soon become clear with the imposition of European mandates over the region.

III. The Brief Arab Kingdom (1918–1920)

The following years saw the rise of a promising Arab nationalist project. In March 1920, the Syrian National Congress declared full independence and appointed Prince Faisal as constitutional monarch of the new Kingdom of Syria.

However, this vision clashed with the imperial ambitions of Britain and France. Unknown to many Arabs at the time, the secret Sykes–Picot Agreement of 1916 had already carved up the Middle East between the two powers. France laid claim to Syria, and when Faisal refused to submit, war followed. In July 1920, Syrian forces were defeated at the

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[6] Charles Glass, *Syria Burning: A Short History of a Catastrophe*, Verso, 2016, pp. 15–18; Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, University of California Press, 1989, pp. 12–14.

[7] Michael Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism*, University of Texas Press, 2005, pp. 20–22.

[8] Rashid Khalidi, *Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America's Perilous Path in the Middle East*, Beacon Press, 2004, pp. 30–34.

Battle of Maysalun. Defense Minister Yusuf al-ʿAzma was killed alongside a small band of volunteers, becoming a national martyr.

This betrayal left a lasting psychological wound. The promises of Arab independence made during the war had been sacrificed for imperial convenience.

IV. The French Mandate (1920–1946)

Divide and Rule

France imposed its mandate over Syria under the League of Nations, presenting it as a civilizing mission. In reality, it was a colonial enterprise. The French immediately partitioned Syria into sectarian mini-states: Damascus, Aleppo, the Druze Mountain, the Alawite State, and Greater Lebanon. This divide-and-rule strategy sought to fragment Syrian national identity and weaken potential resistance.[9]

Despite this fragmentation, Syrian nationalism endured. A broad resistance movement emerged—led by the National Bloc—and mobilized both military and civil resistance.[10]

Armed Uprisings and Nationalist Struggle

Sheikh Saleh al-Ali's Revolt (1919–1921): Launched in the Alawite mountains, this was a rare example of Alawite-led resistance against colonial rule.[11]

Ibrahim Hananu's Revolt (1920–1921): Centered in northern Syria, it built alliances with nationalist factions in Aleppo.[12]

The Great Syrian Revolt (1925–1927): A broad-based uprising led by Sultan al-Atrash in the Druze region, which later spread to Homs,

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[9] Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, Princeton University Press, 1987, pp. 40–45.

[10] Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 233–235.

[11] Sami Moubayed, *Modern History of Syria*, Dar Riad El-Rayyes, 2011, pp. 49–50.

[12] Munir al-Ajlani, *The Modern History of Syria*, Dar al-Fikr, 1997, p. 102.

Hama, and Damascus. France responded with brutal force, including the aerial bombardment of Damascus.[13]

Despite repression, Syria made political gains. A constitution was drafted in 1930, and the first parliamentary elections were held. But real independence remained elusive as France retained final authority until the Second World War shifted the balance of power.[14]

V. World War II and the Path to Independence (1939–1946)

When Nazi Germany occupied France in 1940, Syria fell under the control of the Vichy regime. In 1941, Allied forces and Free French troops reclaimed the territory, pledging independence to Syria—but again, this proved hollow.[15]

Although a provisional government was formed and nationalist leaders were promised sovereignty, French troops remained stationed in major cities, provoking widespread anger.[16]

Only after sustained popular protests, international pressure, and postwar shifts did France agree to withdraw. On April 17, 1946, the last French soldier left Syrian soil. Independence had finally been achieved.[17]

VI. Post-Independence Instability and Coups (1946–1970)

The Age of Coups

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[13] Michael Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism*, University of Texas Press, 2005, pp. 80–91.
For more details and about the Syrian revolts, see:
Muhammad Farouk al-Khalidi, *The Great Conspiracy Against the Levant: An Analytical Study of the First Half of the 20th Century* (Arabic), 1st ed., Dar al-Rawi, Dammam, KSA, 1421/2000.

[14] Hussein Ali Mahfoudh, pp. 96–99.

[15] Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, Routledge, 2001, pp. 15–17.

[16] Sami Moubayed, *Modern History of Syria,* Dar Riad El-Rayyes, 2011, pp. 61–63.

[17] Hussein Ali Mahfoudh, p. 105.

The post-independence period was marked by turbulence. Weak democratic institutions, ideological infighting, and foreign meddling paved the way for a series of military coups:

March 1949: Husni al-Zaʿim seizes power.

August 1949: Sami al-Hinnawi overthrows him.

December 1949: Adib al-Shishakli takes power, establishing Syria's first personalist dictatorship until his ouster in 1954.

Arab Nationalism and the United Arab Republic

In the 1950s, Arab nationalist sentiment surged—fueled by the ideologies of the Baʿath Party and Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. In 1958, Syria merged with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic (UAR), a bold experiment in pan-Arab unity. However, dissatisfaction with Egyptian dominance led to a Syrian military coup in 1961 that dissolved the union.

VII. Baʿthist Rule and the Rise of Alawite Power

The 1963 Baʿathist Coup and Internal Struggles

On March 8, 1963, the Baʿath Party seized power, but internal divisions between civilian and military factions quickly surfaced. Over time, Alawite officers gained control of key security and military institutions, purging their Sunni and nationalist rivals.[18]

Notably, the 1967 Six-Day War occurred under Baʿthist rule. Syria lost the strategic Golan Heights to Israel. Then-Minister of Defense Hafez al-Assad was widely blamed for the regime's military failure.[19]

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[18] Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, Routledge, 2001, pp. 27–31.

[19] Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East,* University of California Press, 1989, pp. 90–93. Also, see: Khalil Mustafa, *Suqūt al-Jawlān* (*The Fall of the Golan Heights*), Dār al-Iʿtisām, Cairo.

In 1970, Assad staged a bloodless coup—dubbed the "Corrective Movement"—against fellow Baʿathist Salah Jadid. He consolidated power and set the stage for a dynastic authoritarian regime.[20]

VIII. The Alawite Ascendancy: From Margins to Power

Historical Marginalization and Colonial Opportunity

Alawites were historically isolated and impoverished. Under Ottoman rule, they were excluded from government and religious institutions. The French mandate reversed this dynamic by recruiting minorities into the colonial military, granting Alawites unprecedented access to state power.[21]

Military Recruitment and Social Mobility

The French formed the "Army of the Levant," drawing heavily from Alawites, Druze, and Christians. After independence, many Alawites transitioned into the Syrian Army and advanced rapidly within its ranks.[22]

Minority Alliances within the Baʿath

Although the Baʿath Party espoused secular Arab nationalism, it became a vehicle for minority coalitions that sought to check Sunni dominance. Alawite officers, particularly those from rural backgrounds, rose by leveraging their military discipline and internal cohesion.[23]

Systematic Purges and Power Consolidation

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[20] Sami Moubayed, *Modern History of Syria*, Dar Riad El-Rayyes, 2011, pp. 92–94.
[21] Abdullah al-Nuaim, *The Alawite Sect in Syria: From Marginalization to Power*, Al Jazeera Center for Studies, 2012, pp. 3–5
[22] Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, University of California Press, 1989, pp. 50–53
[23] Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, Routledge, 2001, pp. 35–38.

Successive purges of rival officers ensured that the military and intelligence services became Alawite strongholds. Salah Jadid and Hafez al-Assad played central roles in this consolidation.[24]

The 1970 "Corrective Movement"

Assad's takeover finalized the shift of power. From 1970 onward, Syria was ruled by a tightly controlled Alawite-led regime. Key sectors—military, security, and economy—became entwined with Assad's family and inner circle.[25]

Sectarian Foundations of the Assad Regime

While maintaining a public image of secular nationalism, Assad's rule rested on a narrow sectarian base. The regime's survival depended on loyalist networks rooted in the Alawite community and bolstered by a vast security apparatus.[26]

This reality sowed the seeds of deep resentment, particularly among disenfranchised Sunni communities. The sectarian imbalance would come to the fore decades later, when the 2011 uprising erupted with explosive intensity.[27]

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[24] James L. Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: A History*, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 226

[25] Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, Routledge, 2001, pp. 42–44.

[26] Charles Glass, *Syria Burning: A Short History of a Catastrophe*, Verso, 2016, pp. 26–28.

[27] Rashid Khalidi, *Resurrecting Empire*, Beacon Press, 2004, pp. 38–40

Part I

The Roots and Beginnings (Pre-2011)

1

Syria Under Assad Rule: Decades of Repression and Silence

I. The Era of Hafez al-Assad (1970–2000)

Following years of coups and political instability throughout the 1960s, Defense Minister General Hafez al-Assad seized power in a bloodless coup in November 1970, known as the "Corrective Movement."[1] He swiftly set about consolidating his rule by creating a formal political structure that would lend his regime an appearance of legitimacy. In 1971, a 173-member People's Council was appointed, which then nominated Assad as the sole presidential candidate. This marked the beginning of a long series of referendums in which Assad consistently claimed over 99% of the vote.[2]

In 1972, he formed the National Progressive Front, a coalition of minor satellite parties led by the Ba'ath Party, to project an image of political plurality while maintaining absolute Ba'athist dominance. The 1973 permanent constitution codified this monopoly: Article 8 declared the Ba'ath Party the "leader of state and society," effectively legalizing the one-party system.[3] While these measures established the institutional facade of governance, actual power remained concentrated in the hands of Assad and a tight circle of loyalists.[4]

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[1] Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, University of California Press, 1989, pp. 123–126

[2] Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, Center for Arab Unity Studies, 1996, p. 57.

[3] Ibid., p. 58.

[4] Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, University of Chicago Press, 1999, pp. 28–30.

Despite the formal institutions, Assad built an informal system based on personal loyalty and patronage, especially with senior military and intelligence officers—most of whom were Alawites, the same minority sect as Assad himself.[5] A state of emergency, declared in 1963, remained in effect without interruption, justified by the ongoing conflict with Israel. This gave the regime sweeping powers of arbitrary detention and repression.[6]

Assad systematically constructed what came to be known as the "security state." Intelligence agencies were empowered far beyond their formal mandates, infiltrating every aspect of daily life.[7] These agencies became feared instruments of surveillance and coercion, silencing dissent through arrests, torture, and forced disappearances. A cult of personality emerged around Assad, who was styled the "Leader of the March" as early as 1971, and whose image was deeply tied to national loyalty and identity.[8]

Effectively, Syria under Assad became a vast prison. State institutions and civil society were subordinated to the party and the leader. Trade unions and popular organizations became tools for monitoring and mobilizing the populace rather than representing them.[9] Assad created a totalitarian system characterized by absolute control and the systematic elimination of opposition. Fear and enforced silence became defining features of life under his rule.

By the late 1970s, the regime faced its most serious internal threat: an armed insurgency led by militant Islamist groups, especially the "Fighting Vanguard" (al-Talīʿah al-Muqātilah), an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood.[10] This uprising was a response to long-standing sectarian repression, political exclusion, and systematic persecution of Sunni

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[5] Nikolaos Van Dam, p. 59.

[6] Human Rights Watch, *A Wasted Decade*, July 2010.

[7] Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, pp. 31–34.

[8] Lina Khatib, *Power Networks in Assad's Syria*, Chatham House, 2011, pp. 6–9.

[9] Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*, Zed Books, 2003, p. 112.

[10] Hama 1982: Memory of Blood, Association of Sednaya Prison Detainees and Missing Persons, 2017.

Muslims. The insurgents escalated their campaign in the late 1970s and early 1980s with assassinations and bombings, targeting regime officials, especially from the Alawite community.

Since the Ba'ath takeover in 1963 and particularly after Hafez al-Assad's rise to power in 1970, the regime aggressively repressed Muslim groups, especially the Muslim Brotherhood.[11] Thousands were imprisoned without trial, tortured in notorious prisons like Mezzeh and Tadmur, and denied any legal recourse. In 1979, over 80 Alawite officers were killed in an attack at the Artillery School in Aleppo, attributed to al-Talīʿah, seen as retaliation for regime atrocities.[12] Many Sunni Syrians viewed the Alawite-led regime as an authoritarian minority imposing its will and excluding them from power. The insurgents increasingly framed the regime not as a political rival but as a sectarian occupier, fueling a retaliatory and jihadist ideology. In retaliation for a failed assassination attempt on Assad, his brother Rifaat led the massacre of over a thousand unarmed Sunni prisoners at Tadmur Prison in 1980.[13] This atrocity marked a turning point, intensifying calls for armed resistance. With no space for peaceful reform or free expression, many activists saw armed struggle as the only remaining option. Al-Talīʿāh adopted increasingly radical rhetoric, hardened by regime intransigence and brutality. Targeted attacks on intelligence officials and regime loyalists were seen by supporters as legitimate responses to mass torture, rape, and killings in prisons. Al-Talīʿah positioned itself as the defender of the Sunni majority against an Alawite-Ba'athist security regime. With Alawite dominance in the army and judiciary, and the complete politicization of law enforcement, many youths joined the insurgency convinced that Syria had become a sectarian police state.

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[11] Human Rights Watch, *Syria's Tadmor Prison: Dismantling a Legacy of Torture*, May 2001.

[12] International Crisis Group, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People's Slow-motion Revolution*, 2011, p. 6.

[13] Human Rights Watch, *Syria's Tadmor Prison: Dismantling a Legacy of Torture*, May 2001.

Notable Operations by the Vanguard:

- The Aleppo Artillery School massacre (1979)
- Assassination of senior intelligence officers
- Bombings of military and security targets in Aleppo, Damascus, and Hama

The regime responded with a ferocious crackdown, culminating in the 1982 Hama Massacre.[14] Rifaat al-Assad's Defense Companies (Sarāyā al-Difāʿ) besieged and shelled the city, a stronghold of the rebellion, killing tens of thousands and leveling entire neighborhoods. The Brotherhood's presence was crushed, and any semblance of organized opposition was annihilated.

The Hama Massacre became a defining event in modern Syrian history—one of the worst atrocities ever committed by an Arab regime against its own people.[15] It installed a deep sense of terror among Syrians and communicated a clear message: dissent would be met with overwhelming violence. What followed was a prolonged era of silence, with Assad consolidating totalitarian control over a population traumatized and atomized by fear.

II. The Era of Bashar al-Assad (2000–2011)

When Hafez al-Assad died in June 2000, power passed to his son Bashar in an unprecedented act of dynastic succession in the Arab republican world.[16] The constitution was hastily amended to lower the minimum presidential age from 40 to 34, allowing Bashar to assume the presidency. He was nominated by the Ba'ath Party and approved in a referendum with over 99% of the vote.

Bashar assumed office amid cautious optimism. Young, Western-educated, and untainted by the old guard, he promised reform and

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[14] Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*, pp. 113–115.

[15] Lina Khatib, *Power Networks in Assad's Syria*, p. 9.

[16] Thomas Carothers, "Arab Political Realism: Why Reform Stalled in Syria," Carnegie Endowment, 2006.

modernization. In his inaugural speech, he spoke of the need for "creative thinking," "constructive criticism," and even "democracy."

What followed was a brief political opening known as the "Damascus Spring" (2000–2001).[17] Intellectuals launched discussion forums, political prisoners were released, and there was a sense that authoritarianism might be softening. Mezzeh Prison was closed. Hopes ran high.

But the optimism was short-lived. By mid-2001, the regime reversed course. Security agencies reasserted control, political forums were shut down, and dozens of activists were arrested,[18] including prominent parliamentarians and thinkers like Riad Seif and Aref Dalila. Human rights organizations reported at least 92 arrests between 2001 and 2010 for peaceful expression alone.

Analysts believe Bashar's younger brother Maher Assad, a hardliner, played a key role in convincing him to abandon reform. Maher, who led the Republican Guard and 4th Armored Division, emerged as a power behind the scenes—the regime's "enforcer."

Throughout Bashar's first decade, the security state persisted. The Ba'ath Party remained the dominant force, with the National Progressive Front as its hollow façade. The state of emergency endured until 2011, ensuring unchecked powers for the intelligence services. Arbitrary detention, disappearances, and torture remained widespread.

Although Bashar retired some figures from the old guard, he replaced them with younger loyalists. The intelligence agencies were consolidated under his control, while Maher's military units became the regime's core defensive force. These elite units, descended from Rifaat's old Sarāyā al-Difāʿ, were tasked with protecting the regime from internal threats.

A defining feature of the 2000s was the rise of a regime-linked oligarchy. Bashar's cousin Rami Makhlouf became the face of crony

[17] The Damascus Declaration, 2005, Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression.

[18] International Crisis Group, "Popular Protest", 2011, p. 3.

capitalism in Syria.[19] Through control of telecommunications (notably Syriatel), banking, and real estate, Makhlouf amassed a fortune estimated at 50–60% of Syria's economy before 2011. His wealth funded regime projects and patronage networks. He embodied the new social contract: economic liberalization for the few, political repression for the many.

Meanwhile, civil society remained tightly controlled. While the regime allowed the formation of some NGOs and private newspapers, these were heavily monitored and often run by regime insiders. Independent initiatives were blocked or co-opted. Even humanitarian organizations like the Syrian Trust for Development (run by First Lady Asma al-Assad) were extensions of regime soft power.

Media reform proved superficial. While new publications emerged, critical voices were censored or shut down. Newspapers like *al-Domari* were quickly silenced, while others like *al-Watan* (owned by Makhlouf) toed the official line. Internet access expanded in the mid-2000s, but was heavily monitored. Hundreds of websites were blocked, including Facebook and YouTube. Online activists were arrested, including bloggers like Karim Arabji and student Tall al-Mallouhi, who was detained in 2009 for critical online posts.

By 2010, the picture was clear: limited economic reform had benefited a narrow elite, while political life remained suffocated. The promises of democracy and transparency proved hollow. Human Rights Watch's 2010 report, *A Wasted Decade*, concluded that Bashar had utterly failed to improve Syria's human rights record.[20] Economic development in urban centers masked growing inequality, unemployment, and rural marginalization.

The regime suppressed even small acts of dissent. Peaceful protests, student gatherings, and online criticism were met with firings, arrests, and torture. Ethnic minorities, such as the Kurds, remained under cultural repression. Their 2004 protest in Qamishli was violently crushed.

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[19] Burhan Ghalyoun, *A Manifesto for Democracy*, Arab Cultural Center, 2001, p. 17.

[20] Human Rights Watch, "A Wasted Decade", July 2010.

By early 2011, Syria had become a state ruled by an entrenched family dictatorship, enforced by a ruthless security apparatus. The facade of stability hid deep reservoirs of popular resentment. When protests erupted in Daraa in March 2011, the wall of fear that had stood for decades began to crack. The uprising that followed was the product of this long legacy—a reaction to decades of suppression under the rule of the Assad dynasty.

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2

Assad's Rule: Syria's Security and Economic System

The Assad regime was never a conventional political system governed by institutions or the principles of a modern state built on legitimacy and peaceful transfer of power. Rather, it was a deeply entrenched power network that merged security, economic control, sectarian hierarchy, and personal loyalty. At its center stood a singular authority—Hafez al-Assad and later his son Bashar—who ruled not through institutions but through force, surveillance, and absolute centralization.[1]

I. The Security State: Ruling by Fear

From the moment Hafez al-Assad seized power in 1970, he understood that his rule lacked electoral legitimacy and that the Ba'ath Party alone could not provide genuine popular support. As a result, he constructed a "security state," which functioned as the true power structure while traditional state institutions—parliament, government, judiciary—were reduced to ceremonial façades.[2]

Multiple intelligence agencies were created and tasked with monitoring every sector of society.[3] These included:

General Intelligence Directorate (State Security)

Military Intelligence Branch

Political Security Branch

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[1] Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, University of California Press, 1988, pp. 119–121.

[2] Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, University of Chicago Press, 1999, pp. 33–36.

[3] Lina Khatib, *Power Networks in Assad's Syria*, Chatham House, 2011, p. 6.

Air Force Intelligence

Criminal Security and Investigative Units

Each agency maintained its own prisons, informants, and overlapping jurisdictions. This fragmentation was intentional: it prevented any single agency from monopolizing power, ensured mutual surveillance, and consolidated ultimate loyalty to the president.[4]

Personal loyalty was the chief criterion for appointments and promotions within these agencies. This system produced a senior security class immune from oversight, wielding unchecked authority. Fear permeated society. Syrians avoided political discussion even within their own homes. The phrase "the walls have ears" came to encapsulate daily life in a classic police state.

II. A Subjugated Economy: From Socialism to Crony Capitalism

During the early years of Hafez al-Assad's rule, Syria followed a state-planned socialist economy, characterized by nationalization and central control. But with Bashar al-Assad's succession in 2000, the regime introduced what it branded "economic openness" or "social market economy."[5]

This shift, however, was not genuine economic liberalization. Instead, it ushered in an oligarchic-mafia model where public wealth was concentrated in the hands of a small elite with direct ties to the ruling family. Chief among them was Rami Makhlouf, Bashar's maternal cousin, who acquired monopolies in telecommunications, banking, real estate, and trade. At one point, Makhlouf reportedly controlled nearly half of Syria's economy.[6]

Privatization turned into a mechanism for transferring public assets to regime loyalists. Independent businesspeople were pressured through extortion, arbitrary taxation, or coerced partnerships with security-

[4] Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), "The Security Economy in Syria", 2017.

[5] International Crisis Group, "Syria Under Bashar: A Wasted Decade", 2005.

[6] Human Rights Watch, "A Wasted Decade", July 2010.

connected figures. Over time, the middle class eroded, poverty and unemployment soared, and bribery became the primary tool for completing bureaucratic transactions. Economic participation became tied to political loyalty, and the economy itself served as an instrument of domination.

III. Sectarian Leverage: Securing Power Through Minority Control

Despite official rhetoric of national unity, the Assad regime relied on a sectarian power structure. Key positions in the military and intelligence sectors were dominated by Alawites—the sect to which the Assad family belongs—with token representation from other groups to maintain a façade of balance.[7]

This sectarian concentration was not demographically representative but a deliberate survival strategy. By binding the fate of Alawite elites to the regime, Assad created a loyalist core with vested interests in preserving the system. Over time, networks of patronage and protection formed within these circles, reinforcing their grip on state power.

Sectarianism was not imposed on society at large, but it was institutionalized within the mechanisms of power. This created an invisible wall between the ruling elite and the broader Sunni-majority population, especially in major urban centers. The erosion of national identity and trust between social groups would later contribute to the volatility of the 2011 uprising.

IV. Education and Media: Manufacturing Obedience

The regime never underestimated the power of ideas. From the earliest levels of schooling, the Assad regime tightly controlled education, turning schools and universities into factories of obedience. Curricula emphasized Baʿathist ideology, glorified the president, and discouraged

[7] Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, Arab Unity Studies Center, 1996, pp. 49–51.

critical thought.[8] Subjects such as nationalism and civic education were reduced to repetitive praise of the ruling party.

Universities were heavily policed by informants, with academic promotions linked to political loyalty rather than merit. Free inquiry vanished, and intellectuals who dissented were marginalized, harassed, or exiled.

State media was merely an extension of the regime's security apparatus. Newspapers like *Tishrin* and *al-Thawra* functioned as propaganda sheets, while television anchors acted as regime spokespersons.[9] Critical journalism was non-existent. Even with the advent of the internet—belatedly introduced in Syria—many sites were blocked, and bloggers faced arrest for any sign of dissent. Every potential space for public discourse was sealed.

Through this interconnected matrix of security repression, economic exclusion, sectarian privilege, and ideological control, the Assad regime governed not through law, but through fear.[10] Legitimacy stemmed not from achievement or consent but from loyalty and coercion. For decades, this system successfully neutralized dissent. But when the earthquake of 2011 struck, the edifice—built on decades of silenced pain—began to crack. The stability Syria had seemingly enjoyed was finally exposed as a brittle illusion masking deep and violent authoritarianism.

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[8] Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, pp. 45–47.

[9] Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, "Report on Media Censorship in Syria", 2008.

[10] Lina Khatib, *Power Networks in Assad's Syria*, Chatham House, 2011, pp. 11–12.

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3

The Arab Spring and the Early Tremors in Syrian Streets

In late 2010, the Arab world witnessed a turning point that would reshape the region for decades. In the Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid, a young street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in protest against police abuse, poverty, and humiliation.[1] His desperate act sparked mass protests that quickly brought down President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's long-standing regime.

What began in Tunisia was no isolated event. The protests spread rapidly across the Arab world—an uprising of people long silenced by authoritarianism. Egypt's streets and squares filled with millions demanding dignity and freedom, leading to the fall of President Hosni Mubarak after three decades in power. Similar uprisings erupted in Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain. Despite differing contexts, a common message echoed: fear had lost its grip, and the people had awakened.

Winds of Change Blow Toward Syria

In Damascus, the regime responded with a mix of false confidence and outright denial. Syrian state media repeatedly pushed the narrative of "Syrian exceptionalism," insisting that Syria was immune to unrest.[2] It portrayed the country as the stronghold of resistance against Israel, the beating heart of Arab nationalism, and a defiant bulwark against Western imperialism. The state assumed that this ideological posture, combined

[1] Marc Lynch, "The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East", PublicAffairs, 2012, p. 7.

[2] Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, University of Chicago Press, 1999, pp. 38–40.

with fears of an Iraqi-style collapse, would shield it from any revolutionary tide.

This rhetoric resonated with some segments of the population, especially those with vested interests or those traumatized by the chaos in neighboring countries. But the regime failed to see that slogans were no longer enough. Years of deep-rooted corruption, rising unemployment, declining education, and widening inequality had worn thin the social contract.[3] Grievances festered beneath the surface. The scars of past atrocities—like the 1982 Hama massacre—and the unresolved pain of tens of thousands who had disappeared into the regime's prisons, remained vivid in the public consciousness.[4]

As Syrians watched Mubarak and Ben Ali fall, a new question emerged: why not here? Was Bashar al-Assad truly an unshakable destiny? The concept of revolution, once a fantasy, began to feel plausible—even necessary.

Signs of Discontent Before Daraa

Although the spark of the Syrian revolution ignited in Daraa in March 2011, signs of unrest had been building quietly for months.

In the digital space, a new discourse was emerging. Blogs, Facebook posts, and online forums carried unprecedented levels of criticism, often written in careful, metaphorical language.[5] Writers, many anonymous, called for reform, an end to repression, and more social justice. Even with censorship, the online world allowed Syrians to share their frustration and envision a different future.

Social media, especially Facebook and YouTube, became vital tools for breaking state-imposed silence.[6] Videos from Egyptian and Tunisian protests circulated widely inside Syria, stirring hope and sparking bold

[3] Zahir Khalil, "Syria and the Revolution", Harmoon Center, 2017, pp. 22–25.

[4] Haitham Manna, "From Massacre to Massacre", Syrian Human Rights Center, 2012, pp. 11–13.

[5] Jillian C. York and Ethan Zuckerman, "New Media and the Arab Spring," MIT Civic Media, 2011.

[6] Carnegie Middle East Center, "Syria's Muted Spring", 2011.

conversations. Young Syrians began using VPNs to bypass blocked websites and discuss taboo topics. Bloggers like Razan Ghazzawi and Razan Zaitouneh became early voices of defiance.

In February 2011, relatives of political detainees held a silent protest outside the Ministry of Interior in Damascus—an unprecedented act in a country long accustomed to only state-orchestrated gatherings.[7] Around the same time, public figures and intellectuals began releasing cautious statements calling for political reform. The most notable was a renewed call for implementing the long-ignored Damascus Declaration, which advocated democratic change.

The security apparatus responded with its typical mix of sarcasm and brutality. Officers mocked the protests as naïve and assumed they could be easily extinguished. What they failed to grasp was that Syrians themselves had changed. The citizen once paralyzed by fear was slowly finding their voice.

Fear Erodes: The Psychological Trigger of Revolution

The erosion of fear was the revolution's most critical condition. This transformation didn't come through top-down opposition organizing but through a silent collective awakening.[8] Silence began to feel like complicity; courage, once rare, became contagious.

The Arab Spring didn't just deliver news—it redefined what was possible. Protest became a moral statement, shouting against injustice became a way to reclaim dignity, and revolution turned from a fantasy into a reachable dream.

Thus, cracks began to appear in Syria's wall of silence. The arrest and torture of schoolchildren in Daraa—after they spray-painted slogans inspired by the Arab Spring—was the spark, but not the surprise.[9] It was the culmination of years of frustration and deferred hope.

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[7] Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), "Report on Civil Mobilization in Syria Prior to March 2011."

[8] Maisa Al-Zoubi, Syria: From Revolution to Failed State*, Riyad El-Rayyes Books, 2015, p.

[9] Human Rights Watch, "We've Never Seen Such Horror," June 2011.

A Revolution Awakened, Not Imported

Contrary to regime propaganda that claimed the uprising was a foreign plot, the Syrian revolution was a deeply internal response to decades of repression, marginalization, and stolen futures.[10] The Arab Spring didn't implant revolution in Syria—it awakened it. It stirred dormant memories, old wounds, and a long-buried desire for change.

Syrians did not copy a foreign model. They reclaimed a long-denied right: the right to speak, to dream, and to demand justice. They needed only the courage to act—and the Arab Spring gave them just enough light to see the path ahead.

[10] Documented interviews from *The Syrian Platform* and *Voices from Syria (Hakayemaanhat)*.

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Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East*, PublicAffairs, 2012.

Jillian C. York and Ethan Zuckerman, "Introduction: New Media and the Arab Spring," MIT Center for Civic Media, 2011.

4

The Opposition Before the Revolution: Silenced Voices and Faint Attempts

For decades, Syria lived under an authoritarian security regime that tightly controlled both state and society. Despite the surface-level calm imposed by the regime, there were fragmented movements of opposition simmering beneath—faint voices calling for political reform and civil liberties. These voices were repeatedly met with suppression and marginalization. This chapter explores the characteristics of the Syrian opposition before 2011 and analyzes the reasons behind its weakness and fragmentation despite the growing internal pressures.

Historical Opposition Parties: Repression and Attrition

Since the early 1980s, the Syrian political scene was systematically emptied of genuine opposition. The Muslim Brotherhood, the most organized and potent faction prior to the 1982 Hama massacre, was rendered paralyzed by the brutal crackdown that followed. Law No. 49 of 1980 criminalized mere membership in the group with the death penalty.[1]

Other leftist and nationalist parties—like the Communist Party (Political Bureau) led by Riad al-Turk, and the Labor Communist Party—also suffered heavy waves of arrests and dismantlement. Their leadership was exiled or imprisoned, and their grassroots support eroded either from fear or disillusionment.[2]

Under the pressure of security forces, political parties virtually disappeared from the public scene. Only pro-regime parties within the

[1] Human Rights Watch, *Syria: The Silenced Majority*, October 2001.

[2] Raymond Hinnebusch, *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba'thist Syria*, Westview Press, 1990, pp. 221–223.

so-called "National Progressive Front" were allowed to operate, serving as a superficial display of pluralism under one-party rule.

The Damascus Spring (2000–2001): A Brief Thaw, A Swift Retreat

When Bashar al-Assad inherited power in 2000 following his father's death, a wave of cautious optimism swept across Syria's intellectual and political elite.[3] This brief period became known as the "Damascus Spring," marked by the emergence of political and cultural forums hosted in private homes.[4] Discussions focused on constitutional reform, political pluralism, and lifting the state of emergency.[5]

However, this brief political blossoming lasted only a few months. The security establishment swiftly reasserted control. A crackdown followed: prominent activists and thinkers like Michel Kilo, Aref Dalila, and Riad Seif were arrested, independent media outlets were closed or suppressed, and civil forums were shut down.[6]

The regime sent a clear message: political reform beyond loyalty to the presidency would not be tolerated.

The Damascus Declaration (2005): A Fragile Coalition Against a Hardened Regime

In 2005, diverse political and civic forces—from Arab nationalists, leftists, and moderate Islamists to independents—came together to form the *Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change*.[7] This was the most serious attempt to build a broad-based opposition alliance. The

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[3] Steven Heydemann, "Authoritarianism in Syria: Institutions and Social Conflict, 1946–1970," *Cornell University Press*, 1999.

[4] Salam Kawakibi, *The Damascus Spring: A Missed Opportunity for Change*, Arab Reform Initiative, 2006.

[5] Joshua Landis, "The Damascus Spring," in *Middle East Report*, No. 221, Winter 2001.

[6] Amnesty International, *Syria: Smothering Freedom of Expression*, 2002.

[7] Thomas Pierret, "The Syrian Baath Party and the Damascus Declaration: A Struggle over Reform," *Arab Studies Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 1, Spring 2008.

declaration called for constitutional reform, peaceful transfer of power, and human rights protections.[8]

Despite its ambition, the coalition struggled to break the regime's political stranglehold. Signatories faced smear campaigns and were subject to arrest and harassment, including the detention of 12 leading members in 2008 after a national council meeting. The declaration also failed to build a popular base, as it lacked accessible messaging for the broader Syrian public, most of whom remained detached from organized political life.

The Diaspora Opposition: Isolated Efforts Abroad

Most of Syria's political opposition was eventually compelled to operate from exile, particularly in Europe, Lebanon, and Türkiye.[9] These exiled figures attempted to build alternative institutions, convene conferences, and lobby the international community. However, the opposition-in-exile faced persistent challenges, including deep ideological divisions among Islamists, secularists, and Arab nationalists; a disconnection from the everyday struggles of Syrians inside the country; a lack of genuine international support, as major powers continued to treat the Assad regime as legitimate until the onset of the uprising; and regime infiltration and psychological warfare that spread mistrust and undermined coordination efforts.[10]

Before the revolution, the opposition suffered from several critical weaknesses. It remained fragmented, unable to coalesce around a unified platform or vision. Strategically, it lacked a clear plan to erode the regime's power or to engage in gradual political change. Its outreach to the Syrian public was minimal, with opposition leaders rarely engaging in grassroots mobilization. Much of their rhetoric was elitist and abstract, focused on broad political ideals while neglecting the immediate

[8] Michel Kilo, "The Syrian Opposition: A Vision for Democratic Change," *Carnegie Papers* – Middle East Series, 2006.

[9] Yassin al-Haj Saleh, *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy*, Hurst Publishers, 2017.

[10] Aron Lund, "Divided They Stand: An Overview of Syria's Political Opposition Factions," Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 2013.

economic and social concerns of ordinary people.[11] These failures created a deep rift between the opposition elite and the broader Syrian society.

When the revolution erupted in March 2011, it took not only the regime by surprise but also the traditional opposition. The very society many believed had been silenced or depoliticized rose up with chants of "The people want the downfall of the regime." From that moment forward, Syria entered a new historical phase—one in which the traditional opposition found itself struggling to catch up with a grassroots movement that had already surged ahead, reshaping the country's political reality from the ground up.[12]

[11] Haid Haid, *The Syrian Opposition: Political Strategies and Structural Failures*, Chatham House Papers, 2014.

[12] The Damascus Declaration, 2005.

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Faces of the Opposition – Leading Figures and Their Struggle with the Regime

The Syrian opposition before the revolution was not a cohesive political force or institutional front. Rather, it was embodied in individual voices—intellectuals, activists, and political figures—who sought, within the limits of repression, to speak out against authoritarianism and call for democratic reform. These individuals paid a steep price for their dissent: imprisonment, exile, defamation, or enforced disappearance.

This chapter highlights some of the key opposition figures who stood against the regime before 2011, along with their stances and the fate they encountered.

Michel Kilo: The Struggling Intellectual

Michel Kilo, born in Latakia in 1940, was one of the most prominent figures in Syria's democratic opposition. A journalist, translator, and writer, Kilo was deeply committed to freedom of expression and political pluralism. He co-authored the Damascus Declaration in 2005 and advocated for peaceful reform and civil state principles. He was arrested multiple times, notably in 2006 after signing the Beirut-Damascus Declaration, and spent three years in Adra prison.[1]

Despite imprisonment and pressure, Kilo continued to write and promote dialogue. After the revolution began, he co-founded the Syrian Democratic Forum and later joined the Syrian National Coalition. He died in Paris in 2021 due to COVID-19 complications.

Riad Seif: The Businessman-Turned-Dissident

[1] Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Repression of Activists Continues," 2006.

Riad Seif, a former member of parliament and businessman, was among the few who tried to challenge the regime from within. He publicly denounced corruption, especially the mobile telecommunications monopoly linked to Rami Makhlouf. Seif founded the National Dialogue Forum during the Damascus Spring, which was swiftly shut down.[2]

He spent years in detention and house arrest. After the 2011 uprising, he fled abroad and became a co-founder of the Syrian National Coalition, briefly serving as its president.

Abdul Hakim Khalaf: A Communist Voice Amid Militarization

A senior figure in the Syrian Communist Party – Political Bureau faction, Abdul Hakim Khalaf was an early critic of Ba'athist authoritarianism. He was imprisoned multiple times in the 1980s and played a role in the Damascus Declaration.[3] Though his influence waned due to state repression and the broader decline of leftist movements, Khalaf remained committed to nonviolent reform.

Razan Zaitouneh: A Woman Who Confronted the Regime with Words

Born in 1977, Razan Zaitouneh was a lawyer and human rights defender known for documenting abuses and defending detainees. Before 2011, she reported extensively on torture and political imprisonment, often under surveillance and threat.[4]

After the revolution erupted, she co-founded the Local Coordination Committees and operated underground in Eastern Ghouta. In 2013, she was abducted in Douma alongside her husband and colleagues. Her fate remains unknown, but her legacy endures as a symbol of civic courage.

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[2] Joshua Landis, "The Syrian Opposition," Center for Middle East Studies, 2011.
[3] Thomas Pierret, "The Syrian Ba'th Party and the Damascus Declaration," Arab Studies Journal, 2008.
[4] Amnesty International, "Syria: Human Rights Lawyer Missing Since 2013," 2016.

Mustafa Hamza: Resistance from Exile

A political and human rights activist working since the 1980s, Mustafa Hamza organized solidarity campaigns for detainees and maintained communication with networks inside Syria. Focused on documenting abuses and advocating for victims, Hamza represents the quiet persistence of opposition figures in exile.

Additional Key Figures

To capture the wider landscape of pre-2011 dissent, we also note:

Haitham al-Maleh: A renowned human rights lawyer and judge, imprisoned multiple times since the 1980s.

Kamal al-Labwani: Physician and democracy activist, repeatedly arrested and later forced into exile.

Fayez Sara: Journalist and member of the Damascus Declaration, imprisoned and exiled.[5]

Their contributions reinforced the moral backbone of the Syrian opposition, showing diversity across religious, ethnic, and professional lines.

Islamist Detainees – Resilience in the Face of Repression

From Armed Conflict to Systematic Persecution

After the bloody confrontation between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Syrian regime in the late 1970s and early 1980s—culminating in the Hama massacre—the Islamic movement was driven underground or into exile. Law No. 49 of 1980 criminalized Brotherhood membership with the death penalty.[6] Tens of thousands of Islamists were imprisoned or fled the country.

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[5] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "The Damascus Declaration: A Democratic Vision for Syria," 2005.

[6] Human Rights Watch, "Syria: The Silenced Majority," 2001.

The regime extended repression to include Salafist movements and independent religious preachers, conflating religious activism with terrorism.

Thousands were detained without trial, accused of "extremist thought" or, at times, mere suspicion. They were held in infamous prisons like Sednaya, Mezzeh, and Tadmur, where torture, solitary confinement, denial of visits, and degrading treatment were rampant.[7] Numerous survivors have since testified to these violations. The crackdown extended to mosque attendees and non-violent Salafist figures who had no Brotherhood ties. Accused of "disrupting public order" or "spreading radical ideas," many were jailed without charges. Their advocacy of peaceful reform was still treated as a threat. This reveals a fundamental truth: the Assad regime criminalized all dissent, regardless of its nature.

Despite the brutality, Syrian prisons became hubs of intellectual and ideological development. Detainees exchanged ideas, shaped a collective identity, and honed organizational skills. Many emerged from prison with a renewed sense of purpose, becoming key players in the 2011 revolution—whether in civil society, armed groups, or political bodies. At the dawn of the revolution, the regime strategically released some Islamist detainees, hoping perhaps to discredit the uprising.[8] Some fled abroad; others rejoined the opposition; many remain unaccounted for. Yet these prisons didn't break them—they forged them. The experiences of Islamist prisoners, however tragic, seeded a new generation of opposition actors.

The individuals profiled in this chapter did not start the Syrian revolution—but they helped lay its intellectual, moral, and emotional groundwork. Their sacrifices exposed the regime's brutality long before the world took notice. The civic courage they demonstrated inspired a new generation to believe that change was not only necessary, but possible.

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[7] Physicians for Human Rights, "Torture in Syria's Prisons," 2012.

[8] International Crisis Group, "Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People's Slow-motion Revolution," 2011.

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Part II

The Revolution Ignites (2011–2012)

At the dawn of 2011, Syria stood on the cusp of a historic transformation that would reshape its modern history. Decades of authoritarianism, repression, and smoldering public anger erupted into mass protests that transcended religious and sectarian lines, challenging a regime that had long ruled through fear and brute force.

The spark of Syria's uprising was ignited by the broader wave of Arab revolutions—the so-called Arab Spring—but it bore distinctly Syrian features. The earliest protests began in the southern city of Daraa in March 2011, after a group of schoolchildren were arrested and tortured for writing anti-regime slogans on their school walls. This act of brutality triggered an outpouring of public outrage that quickly spread to cities and towns across the country.

Unlike earlier reform movements, the demands this time were radical and unequivocal: an end to the rule of the Assad family, who had gripped the country for over forty years. The initial protests were overwhelmingly peaceful, led by youth seeking freedom, dignity, and justice. But the regime's violent response—marked by live fire, mass arrests, and systemic torture—pushed the country into deeper unrest.

The early phase of the revolution was notable for its diversity of participants: young people driven by a thirst for liberty, human rights defenders, and activists from a wide ideological spectrum. Civil society initiatives began to flourish, even as the regime insisted that the unrest was a foreign conspiracy aimed at destabilizing Syria.

This part explores how peaceful protests escalated into open confrontation and how the dynamics of the conflict grew increasingly violent and complex with the involvement of domestic, regional, and international actors. We will examine the key events of 2011 and 2012, analyze the drivers of the uprising, document the regime's brutal countermeasures, and assess the responses of local and global powers during this critical period.

6

Daraa: The Spark of the Syrian Revolution and the Cradle of Dignity

No one expected the Syrian revolution to ignite in Daraa—a small southern city known for its calm surface and marginalized services. Outwardly loyal to the regime and rooted in tribal traditions, Daraa had long simmered under deep socioeconomic injustices: chronic unemployment, poor services, rampant corruption, and suffocating security control. The situation was even worse in its rural areas, which suffered prolonged drought between 2006 and 2010 without meaningful government response.[1]

The result was a quiet buildup of frustration, intensified by the scenes of uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. In Daraa's conservative society, dignity mattered even more than poverty.

The tribal structure, once a stabilizing factor leveraged by the regime, now fueled the revolt. In tribal culture, the insult to the elders was not just personal—it was communal, a violation of honor that demanded response. This breakdown of the traditional "social contract" between the regime and the tribes turned Daraa's loyalty into defiance.

Children Wrote on Walls—and Brought Down the Wall of Fear

In late February or early March 2011, a group of middle school boys, inspired by the Arab Spring, wrote slogans on their school's walls:

"The people want the downfall of the regime"

"Your turn is coming, Doctor!"

[1] Abdulrahman Al-Haj, "Syria: The Revolution and the Other History," Arab Network for Research, 2014.

These phrases hit like a thunderclap at the Political Security Branch in Daraa, led by Brigadier General Atef Najib[2]—Bashar al-Assad's cousin and one of the most brutal security officials. The children weren't just summoned—they were abducted and brutally tortured, according to their families. Even tribal leaders who pleaded for their release were rebuffed.[3]

What truly ignited the fury was Najib's infamous response to those elders, "Forget your children. And if you can't have more, send us your women to make new ones."

The insult was unforgettable—a slap in the face of an entire community's dignity.

March 18: The Protest That Changed History

On Friday, March 18, 2011, hundreds of Daraa's residents staged a peaceful protest after prayers, demanding the release of the children, accountability for Atef Najib, and an end to the state of emergency. The regime responded with live bullets. The first martyrs fell: Mahmoud al-Jawabra, Hussein al-Masalmeh, Raafat al-Masri, and others.[4]

The funerals became larger demonstrations. Protests grew daily. The regime escalated with brutal force, surrounding the city, cutting electricity and communications, and blocking food and medicine. Eventually, the army was deployed—the first-time tanks and heavy weaponry were used domestically against civilians in modern Syrian history. Massacres followed, later documented by human rights organizations.

Despite the mounting death toll, the international community's early response was muted. Statements of concern were issued, but few concrete actions followed, leaving Syrians to face the regime's brutality alone.

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[2] Atef Najib was arrested in Latakia on Friday, January 31, 2025.

[3] UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, Report on Events in Daraa, September 2011.

[4] Human Rights Watch, "We've Never Seen Such Horror: Crimes Against Humanity by Syrian Security Forces," June 2011.

But something had irrevocably changed: fear had collapsed, and the people's voice had broken free.

Hamza al-Khatib: A Child Who Stirred the Nation's Conscience

Among Daraa's martyrs, the name Hamza Ali al-Khatib stood out. Just 13 years old, he joined a peaceful protest to break the siege on Daraa in late April. He was arrested by security forces. A month later, his body was returned to his family, mutilated and covered in burns, broken bones, and severe torture marks—including the brutal mutilation of his genitals.[5]

Photos of Hamza's body spread across social media and shocked the Syrian, Arab, and global conscience. His death wasn't just a tragedy—it symbolized the violation of Syria's very childhood.

Hamza became an icon of the revolution. His image was raised at every protest; his name chanted in defiance.

The spark from Daraa quickly spread: to Homs, Baniyas, Douma, Hama, Deir Ezzor, and then Damascus and Aleppo. The demands moved from justice for tortured children to a complete toppling of the regime.

From Local Grievances to National Uprising

The protesters' demands soon expanded:

The end of Bashar al-Assad's rule

The lifting of the emergency law

The dismantling of the security state

Daraa's uprising had become a national revolution. The city earned the title "Cradle of the Syrian Revolution."

Women in Daraa played a vital yet often overlooked role—mobilizing families, organizing aid for wounded protesters, and braving checkpoints to smuggle food and medicine during the siege.

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[5] NPR, BBC, and Al Jazeera special reports on Hamza al-Khatib (May–June 2011).

Daraa: More Than Just a Beginning

Daraa was not just the starting point of revolt; it was a moral engine for the revolution. In a single moment, it encapsulated all the reasons for national explosion: authoritarian corruption, lack of justice, social humiliation, bloodshed, and human symbolism.[6]

Daraa will remain engraved in Syrian memory as a symbol of dignity and rebellion. Its story tells future generations: the revolution was no foreign conspiracy—it was born from insult, pain, and violated innocence.

The Beginning of a Long Struggle

From the outset, the regime's response was bloody. Relying on repression, murder, and mass arrests, it gambled on a security solution. But the revolution spread and transformed into a nationwide uprising.

The first phase (March–June 2011) was a moment of collective awakening—a breaking of fear and a rejection of permanent submission to security rule. But it also revealed that the regime was committed to meeting protest with bullets, paving the way for a long, bloody conflict.

[6] Zahir Khalil, "Syria and the Revolution: Studies on Preludes and Trajectories," Harmoon Center, 2017.

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7

The Regime's Response and the Escalation of Violence

When the popular protests began in Syria in March 2011, the slogans raised were clear: "Freedom," "Dignity," "An end to the Emergency Law," and "Stop Security Oppression." The people did not call for war—they called for a free civil life that would end decades of repression and tyranny. But the Syrian regime's response far exceeded the scale of the demands; it was nothing less than a declaration of total war against society.

From the very first days, the regime chose violence over dialogue, brute force over listening, and denial over acknowledgment. Protesters were accused of being foreign agents, terrorists, Salafis, and externally funded conspirators. Thus began the regime's "conspiracy" narrative, which would soon become a permanent pillar of official state discourse.

Denial and Misinformation: The "Foreign Conspiracy" Narrative

From the outset, the regime behaved as though nothing real was happening on the ground. In official statements and on state television, the protests were downplayed as "limited gatherings," and the movement was attributed to the influence of Facebook pages and "al-Jazeera incitement."

Very quickly, this rhetoric evolved into direct accusations against the demonstrators, branding them "foreign agents" and "extremist armed groups" seeking to divide the country. The state propaganda machine was reactivated to demonize the popular movement and create mental chaos and fear.[1]

[1] Abdulrahman al-Haj, "Syria: The Revolution and the Other History," Arab Research Network, 2014.

This narrative psychologically prepared the ground to justify the crimes that would follow.

Militarizing Repression: From Live Ammunition to City Sieges

As the protests spread to Homs, Douma, Baniyas, Daraa, and the countryside of Aleppo, the regime escalated its response drastically by deploying military force as a tool of repression.[2] Key features of this stage included:

- Firing live bullets directly at peaceful demonstrations without warning.
- Deploying snipers on rooftops of public buildings (hospitals, mosques, schools).
- Mass night raids and arrests in rebellious neighborhoods.
- Cutting off communications, electricity, and water from besieged cities.
- Imposing full military sieges on entire cities, such as Daraa, Homs, and Darayya.

The peaceful movement became a deadly risk. Protests turned into funerals, and funerals into larger protests.

The Pivotal Role of the 4th Division and Maher al-Assad

The Fourth Armored Division, led by Brigadier General Maher al-Assad—the president's brother—played a central role in the military operations against civilians.[3] Maher was seen as the regime's hardline military figure, and his division was deployed early in cities like Homs, Daraa, Darayya, and al-Zabadani.

- The Fourth Division was an elite, heavily armed unit, composed largely of sectarian loyalists, which added a bloody, vengeful dimension to its operations.

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[2] Human Rights Watch. Torture Archipelago, July 2012.

[3] Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, "The Armed Opposition in Syria: Emergence and Evolution," 2018.

- It participated in shelling residential neighborhoods with artillery and tanks and accompanied intelligence units in arrest and torture campaigns.
- It was later implicated in several field massacres and mass killings of civilians, such as in Baba Amr (Homs), Darayya, and Muadamiyat al-Sham.

Detention Centers: A System of Institutionalized Torture

Syrian prisons were no strangers to torture, but after the revolution, security practices reached unprecedented levels:

- Human rights organizations documented over **100,000 cases of arrest** in just the first three years.[4]
- Widespread systematic and lethal torture was carried out in security branches like the Palestine Branch, al-Khatib Branch, and Sednaya Prison.
- Enforced disappearance became rampant. People were arrested without warrants, their families were denied information, and they would vanish for years—or die in detention without official notice.

In 2014, the world was shocked by the Caesar Report, which leaked more than 55,000 photos of over 11,000 detainees who died under torture.[5] The photos were taken from within the military intelligence apparatus itself.

From Peaceful Protest to Armed Resistance: Breaking the Security Equation

As a result of this brutal escalation, some community groups began taking up arms—initially to protect neighborhoods and demonstrations.

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[4] Amnesty International. "It Breaks the Human: Torture, Disease and Death in Syria's Prisons," 2015.

[5] Caesar Files Group. "Caesar Photographic Evidence of Systematic Torture and Killing," 2014.

Eventually, some evolved into local armed factions. The decision to bear arms was not ideological but rooted in harsh realities:

- Loss of hope in any political or negotiated solution.[6]
- Escalating mass killings in rebellious cities.[7]
- The collapse of state authority in some regions, leaving a dangerous security vacuum.[8]

Thus, by mid-2012, the revolution had entered a new phase of **armed resistance**, as peaceful protest came to seem an impossible path in the face of a regime that had chosen violent suppression as its existential strategy.

The Regime's Violence: The Root Cause of the Conflict's Explosion

The regime's response to the revolution was not a temporary reaction—it was a fully developed strategy aimed at crushing the uprising and "disciplining" society. But it failed to grasp the depth of the popular transformation and the accumulated anger.

Policies of killing, arrest, torture, and siege shattered psychological barriers, pushing large segments of the population from making demands to fighting for survival. In this way, the regime itself drove the revolution toward militarization—choosing war over reform, repression over compromise, and bloody confrontation over listening.[9]

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[6] International Crisis Group. "Now or Never: A Negotiated Transition for Syria," Report No. 29, March 2012.

[7] Syrian Network for Human Rights, Annual Reports on Human Rights Violations in Syria, 2011–2013.

[8] Syrian Center for Strategic Studies, "From Peaceful Uprising to Armed Resistance," Beirut, 2016.

[9] United Nations. Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, August 2013.

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8

The Role of Youth and Civil Activists

The Rise of a New Generation of Actors

From its earliest days in March 2011, the Syrian revolution was unmistakably a youth-driven uprising. Unlike traditional revolts led by political parties or armed movements, it was Syrian youth who first took to the streets, raising banners that demanded "freedom," "dignity," and "social justice." Inspired by the Arab Spring revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, this generation recognized that their historical moment had arrived.[1]

Young Syrians formed decentralized networks later known as the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs), expanding to more than 70 local groups across the country. Prominent among them were committees in Damascus, Homs, and Daraa. Despite lacking formal political training or party backing, these groups demonstrated a remarkable capacity for covert organization and fieldwork. They coordinated protests, provided basic protection for demonstrators, and published documentation of regime atrocities.[2]

The coordination committees were also consciously inclusive—bringing together Arabs, Kurds, Muslims, Christians, and secular activists in a united civic front. This inclusivity stood in stark contrast to the regime's portrayal of the uprising as sectarian or extremist.

New Media and Breaking the Siege

Amid heavy state media censorship and persecution of independent journalists, Syrian youth turned social media into revolutionary tools:

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[1] Al-Ghazzi, Omar. "Citizen Journalism in Syria: Producing Hope and Memory." Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication, vol. 7, no. 1 (2014): 23–41.

[2] Amnesty International, "Syria: Where Are the Douma Four?" 2015.

Facebook for organizing, YouTube for exposing brutality, and Twitter for delivering real-time updates to the outside world. They launched pages such as "The Syrian Revolution Against Bashar al-Assad" and "Sham Network," which quickly became credible news sources cited by international outlets. These grassroots media efforts shattered the decades-old wall of silence imposed by the regime.[3]

The ingenuity of Syria's digital revolutionaries not only brought global attention to their plight but also inspired solidarity among pro-democracy movements around the world, who looked to Syria as a symbol of grassroots resilience in the digital age.

Women at the Heart of Civil Resistance

Syrian women were never sidelined in the revolution. They played leading and field-level roles—organizing demonstrations, facing arrest and torture, providing relief and alternative education, and engaging in media work. Figures like Razan Zaitouneh, Fadwa Suleiman, and Samira al-Khalil became iconic female voices of Syria's civil revolution, embodying courage and resilience.[4]

Alternative Civil Institutions

As the regime withdrew from certain areas during the uprising, activists stepped in to fill administrative voids. They established local councils to manage daily life—distributing bread, restoring water and electricity, and reopening schools. Despite limited funding and logistical challenges, these experiments in grassroots governance showed Syrians' capacity to build inclusive, participatory models of self-rule.[5]

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[3] Al-Ghazzi, Omar. "Citizen Journalism in Syria: Producing Hope and Memory." Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication, vol. 7, no. 1 (2014): 23–41.

[4] Carothers, Thomas and O'Donohue, Andrew. "Democracy Support Strategies: Syria Case Study," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2015.

[5] Human Rights Watch, "We Live as in War – Crackdown on Peaceful Protesters in Syria," 2011.

Alongside this, youth-led initiatives and NGOs emerged, such as "Youth for Change," "Women Now," and the "Violations Documentation Center." These organizations were involved in training, advocacy, relief work, and documentation of abuses.[6]

Diaspora youth also played an important role in mobilizing international solidarity—organizing rallies in Western cities, translating testimonies, lobbying foreign governments, and maintaining the digital presence of the revolution.[7]

Challenges and Repression

Despite the peaceful and civic nature of the early revolution, activists faced severe repression from the security apparatus. Many LCC founders were abducted, killed, or forced into exile. One of the most symbolic losses was the disappearance of Razan Zaitouneh and her team in Douma in 2013—an incident that struck at the heart of the civil movement.[8]

Civil initiatives also encountered threats from the rise of extremist factions such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, which later suppressed civil activists and rolled back freedoms for which youth had sacrificed so much.[9]

Despite their early momentum, many grassroots civil actors struggled to sustain influence as the conflict dragged on and became increasingly militarized. Fragmentation, exile, and targeted repression all contributed to the gradual erosion of organized civil resistance on the ground.[10]

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[6] Khalil Hariri, "Syrian Civil Society in Wartime," Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 2019, pp. 14–19.

[7] Local Administration Councils Unit (LACU), Annual Report, 2015, pp. 10–13.

[8] Amnesty International, "Syria: Where Are the Douma Four?", 2015.

[9] Lund, Aron. "Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?" Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 2019.

[10] Rim Turkmani, "Women and the Syrian Revolution: Civil Roles in Public Spaces," SCPSS, 2014, pp. 6–10.

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9

The First Cracks in the Regime's Armor

When the first sparks of the Syrian revolution ignited in Daraa in March 2011, the regime believed it could suppress the uprising with the same tools it had relied on for decades: swift crackdowns, mass arrests, and a steady stream of conspiracy-laden propaganda. What it did not anticipate was that the first cracks would emerge from within—from a military and security apparatus it assumed to be solidly loyal and unshakably obedient.

By late April 2011, barely a month into the protests, scattered cases of defections began to surface—particularly in southern Syria, including Daraa, where military units were ordered to fire live rounds at unarmed demonstrators. In this tense climate, many soldiers found themselves grappling with existential questions: Should I obey orders and shoot at my people—or should I defect?[1]

The most prominent figure in this period was First Lieutenant Hussein Harmoush, who in June 2011 publicly announced his defection from the Syrian Army in Jisr al-Shughour and later founded the Free Officers Movement—the first organized military entity to break away from the regime.[2]

Harmoush's defection marked a pivotal moment—not just because he was the first senior officer to break ranks, but because it shattered the illusion that the army remained a monolithic force. His video statement, in full military uniform, sent shockwaves through the regime, which made multiple attempts to assassinate or capture him. In a controversial

[1] Al Jazeera Documentary – The Free Syrian Army: From Defection to Disarray, 2014.

[2] Syrian Free Television – Archived Interviews with Hussein Harmoush and Riyad al-Asaad, 2011–2012.

operation inside Türkiye, Harmoush was eventually abducted and returned to Damascus, where he appeared in a televised "confession" before vanishing without trace.[3]

After Harmoush's high-profile defection, others followed. Throughout 2011, dozens of soldiers and officers—particularly from protest-heavy areas—broke away. By the end of the year, these individuals had begun to form the first units of what would later be called the Free Syrian Army (FSA).[4]

Defections weren't limited to the military. Diplomatic, judicial, and media personnel also began to abandon the regime. One of the most significant cases was the defection of Nawaf al-Fares, Syria's ambassador to Iraq, in July 2012. He denounced the regime as "satanic." Other key figures included Lieutenant Colonel Riyad al-Asaad, who would become one of the FSA's founding figures and prominent voices.[5]

Defections were not merely emotional acts. For many, they stemmed from a moral awakening and a refusal to turn the military into a tool for waging war against Syrian civilians. Widespread circulation of videos documenting atrocities—mass shootings, torture, and shelling of residential neighborhoods—fueled the growing dissent among soldiers.

Still, defections never reached a critical mass capable of fracturing the military as an institution. Several factors contributed to this limitation: the sectarian makeup of the top military command, which remained tightly aligned with the regime; intense surveillance within military units to prevent suspicious activity; and brutal retaliation against the families of defectors, which deterred many.

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[3] Human Rights Watch, By All Means Necessary: Individual and Command Responsibility for Crimes against Humanity in Syria, 2011.

[4] Syrian Network for Human Rights – Statistics on Documented Defections through 2012.

[5] Asharq al-Awsat – "Nawaf al-Fares: I Can No Longer Defend a Regime That Kills Its People," 2012.

Though limited in scale, the early defections had enormous symbolic and psychological value. They confirmed that the regime's grip was not absolute and that dissent existed even within its inner structures.

They also paved the way for the gradual militarization of the revolution. While this shift later led to factionalism and intelligence infiltrations, these early breakaways embodied a powerful truth: that the Syrian soldier could be more than just an instrument of repression. He could be a conscious actor with agency and a moral compass.

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10

The Position of Regional and International Powers

Within just a few months of the Syrian revolution's outbreak, regional and international powers began closely monitoring the unfolding events—and soon intervened with increasing intensity. As the protests spread and the Assad regime responded with brutal repression, Syria quickly became the center of a multifaceted conflict. What began as a domestic uprising for freedom and dignity gradually morphed into a complex proxy war, shaped by conflicting agendas and foreign interference.[1]

1. The Pro-Revolution Regional Bloc: Türkiye, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia

Türkiye

Initially a close ally of the Assad regime—with trade agreements and joint military drills in place until 2010—Türkiye quickly shifted its stance after witnessing the regime's violent crackdown. Ankara hosted multiple opposition conferences, including the pivotal Antalya Conference in 2011, and later backed the formation of the Syrian National Coalition. Türkiye provided refuge for both civilian and armed opposition figures and served as a critical logistical base for the Free Syrian Army (FSA).[2]

However, Türkiye's approach fluctuated, particularly with the rise of jihadist factions in northern Syria. Ankara's long-term strategy became

[1] Abdel Wahab Badrakhan, *Syria: The Stolen Revolution*, Dar al-Saqi, 2015.

[2] Mohammad Nour al-Din, *Türkiye and Syria: From Partnership to Confrontation*, Riyad al-Rayyis, 2016.

increasingly shaped by its domestic security concerns and its rivalry with Kurdish forces.[3]

Qatar

Qatar played a key media and diplomatic role from the outset, most notably through Al Jazeera, which gave the revolution unprecedented exposure. It also financed several opposition factions, especially those with moderate Islamist orientations. Qatar supported initiatives to unify the opposition, though its efforts occasionally clashed with Saudi Arabia's political priorities.[4]

Saudi Arabia

Motivated by its desire to contain Iranian influence in Syria, Saudi Arabia entered the fray after Qatar. Riyadh viewed the fall of Assad as a strategic imperative and channeled support to multiple opposition groups, particularly those aligned with Sunni nationalism. However, its aversion to the Muslim Brotherhood created friction with Qatari-backed elements and hampered unified efforts.[5]

2. The Regime's Backers: Iran and Russia

Iran

Iran viewed the revolution as a direct threat to its regional axis, which stretched from Tehran to Baghdad, Damascus, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. As early as 2012, Iran intervened militarily through the IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps), Hezbollah, and other Shiite militias such as Liwa al-Fatimiyoun. It provided substantial material, intelligence, and logistical support to the Assad regime.[6]

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[3] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, Yale University Press, 2016.

[4] Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies. "The Regional Struggle over Syria: An Analytical Reading," 2018.

[5] Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. "International and Regional Alliances in the Syrian File, 2017.

[6] Fabrice Balanch, "Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War," Washington Institute, 2018.

Iran played an active role in military operations and was instrumental in population displacement and demographic engineering in areas like Zabadani, Darayya, and southern Damascus.[78]

Russia

Russia's involvement began with diplomatic support, notably using its UN Security Council veto to shield Assad from international sanctions starting in October 2011. However, a major turning point came in September 2015 when Russia launched a direct military intervention, ostensibly to fight terrorism. In practice, it focused on targeting opposition-held areas far more than ISIS.[9]

Moscow restructured the Syrian military, established permanent bases in Hmeimim and Tartus, and took the lead in key battles such as Aleppo, Eastern Ghouta, and Daraa. Russia also convened the Astana and Sochi talks, designed to sideline the Geneva political process.[10]

3. The West: Hesitant Support and Strategic Ambiguity

United States

Under President Obama, the U.S. declared that Assad had "lost legitimacy" and imposed sanctions on the regime. It also supported some "moderate" opposition groups through covert programs based in Jordan and Türkiye. However, the administration balked at any direct military intervention.[11]

Even after Assad used chemical weapons in Ghouta in 2013, Obama's decision to abandon military retaliation—despite setting a "red line"—undermined the opposition's confidence in U.S. support. Washington eventually focused almost exclusively on defeating ISIS after 2014, deprioritizing the broader struggle against Assad.[12]

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[7] Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2012: Syria Chapter."

[8] More about the roles of Iran and Russia in later chapters.

[9] International Crisis Group, "Russia's Military Intervention in Syria: A Turning Point?" Briefing No. 47, 2015.

[10] Khalil Zahir, "Proxy War in Syria," Syrian Forum Publications, 2020.

[11] UN Security Council Reports on Syria (2011–2020).

[12] Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, Oxford University Press, 2015.

European Union

The EU expressed political sympathy for the revolution and imposed sanctions but avoided direct engagement. With the refugee crisis erupting in 2015, European priorities shifted to border control and humanitarian aid, not political transition in Syria.[13]

4. Proxy War and a Fragmented Landscape

Divergent foreign agendas splintered the opposition and created competing zones of control, weakening any unified political front. Meanwhile, the Assad regime—bolstered by its allies—regained significant territory.

Syria turned into a battleground for overlapping geopolitical rivalries:

A Sunni-Shiite struggle (Iran vs. Gulf states)

Turkish-Kurdish conflict

Russian-American competition

Scrambles for natural resources and energy corridors[14]

In the end, the Syrian people's aspirations became subordinated to the interests of global and regional powers.

[13] Aron Lund, "Divided They Stand, Carnegie," 2012.

[14] Yezid Sayigh, "Collapse and Reconstruction in Syria," Carnegie Middle East Center, 2022.

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11

The Turn Toward Armed Resistance

By late 2011 and into early 2012, the Syrian landscape had transformed dramatically. What began as a peaceful uprising calling for reform and dignity had collided with the uncompromising violence of a regime determined to survive at any cost. The government's failure to contain the protests through its traditional methods—arrests, propaganda, and indiscriminate violence—only deepened public outrage. Repression no longer worked as a deterrent. Instead, it fueled a growing realization among many activists and defectors that peaceful protest, however noble, would not be enough. Faced with daily massacres, shelling, and disappearances, segments of the opposition began to take up arms.

The country slowly fractured under the weight of war. Syria was no longer governed as a unified state but had become a patchwork of contested zones. The regime clung to strategic strongholds—Damascus, Latakia, Tartus—using its regular army units and pro-regime militias like the *shabiha*, who gained notoriety for their brutality. These areas were reinforced by security branches and supported by Iran-backed forces. Meanwhile, large swaths of rural Syria began slipping from regime control. In the countryside of Daraa, Homs, and the Damascus suburbs, armed opposition units began to carve out space. This shift would later reach provinces like Idlib, parts of Aleppo, and eventually Deir Ezzor.[1]

This fragmentation marked a deeper collapse: the breakdown of centralized authority. The Syrian state, long defined by its monopoly on violence and a tightly managed security hierarchy, now relied almost exclusively on brute force to maintain order. It lost legitimacy in the eyes

[1] Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies, "The Trajectory of the Syrian Revolution," 2015.

of millions and could no longer govern many parts of the country except through siege, fear, and firepower.[2]

As violence escalated, the armed opposition diversified. The earliest and most prominent of these was the **Free Syrian Army (FSA)**, formed by defected officers under Colonel Riad al-Asaad. Its initial purpose was clear: to protect civilians and defend peaceful demonstrators from state violence. The FSA quickly became the backbone of the military opposition, especially in areas where regime control had receded.[3]

Yet as the conflict prolonged, new actors entered the scene. Islamist factions—ranging from mainstream Salafi groups to more hardline jihadist elements—began to organize. Groups like **Ahrar al-Sham** and **Liwa al-Tawhid** emerged with significant manpower and foreign backing.[4] Alongside them, thousands of **local defense units**—often loosely organized neighborhood or village-based militias—formed to protect communities and later participated in attacks against regime checkpoints and security installations.

Despite a shared enemy, ideological differences and competition for influence soon led to fragmentation among the armed groups. Coordination gave way to rivalries. Leadership disputes and diverging strategic visions weakened the broader anti-regime front, setting the stage for future internal conflicts.[5]

Meanwhile, the civilian cost of war rose at an appalling rate. By 2012, the Syrian regime had begun deploying its full military arsenal. Entire neighborhoods were shelled indiscriminately. Airstrikes became common in opposition-held zones. In Homs, particularly in the district of **Baba Amr**, and in the besieged areas of **Eastern Ghouta**, the regime unleashed sustained bombardments. The infamous **barrel bombs**—

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[2] Mohammad Habash, *Syria: The Road of Suffering Toward Freedom*, 2016.

[3] Omar Kouch, "The Free Army and the Turn to Armed Struggle," Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2014.

[4] Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, 2015.

[5] Fabrice Balanche, "Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War," Washington Institute, 2018.

improvised explosive devices dropped from helicopters—became symbols of state terror.[6]

The result was a massive humanitarian catastrophe. By the end of 2012, over two million Syrians had fled across borders into Türkiye, Lebanon, and Jordan. Inside Syria, millions more were displaced from their homes. Entire towns were depopulated. Civilian infrastructure—hospitals, schools, mosques, churches—was reduced to rubble.[7]

At the same time, the political opposition struggled to match the momentum on the ground. Despite having broad support among exiles, activists, and sympathizers abroad, the political opposition failed to unite. There were deep divisions between secular-liberal factions, often aligned with Western backers, and Islamist groups that sought a post-Assad Islamic order.[8] Local grassroots leaders, many of whom had emerged from the revolution's early days, remained focused on practical survival and community governance, often disconnected from the formal opposition bodies abroad.

These tensions led to the creation of multiple, often competing, political umbrellas. The **Syrian National Council (SNC)**, and later the **Syrian National Coalition**, were attempts to organize the opposition into a coherent political front. Yet neither structure managed to gain the full trust of the armed factions nor the population still suffering inside Syria.[9]

International mediation efforts likewise fell short. The **Arab League**, once seen as a potential neutral arbiter, dispatched an observer mission under Sudanese General Mustafa al-Dabi. But the mission was quickly compromised—manipulated by regime escorts and obstructed in

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[6] Human Rights Watch, "They Burned My Heart: War Crimes in Northern Homs," 2012.

[7] Ibid.

[8] International Crisis Group, "Anything But Politics: The State of Syria's Political Opposition," 2013.

[9] Ibid.

the field. Their final reports failed to convey the scale of the crimes occurring.[10]

Meanwhile, the international community attempted a diplomatic track. In June 2012, world powers gathered in Switzerland for the **Geneva I Conference**, which called for a political transition in Syria. However, disagreements over the mechanism of that transition, and the regime's absolute refusal to consider Assad stepping down, rendered the initiative stillborn.[11]

As 2012 came to a close, Syria had entered a new and far more dangerous phase. The uprising had transformed into a civil war. Armed groups proliferated. Foreign fighters began to enter. Regional and global powers increasingly viewed Syria as a battlefield for their own agendas. Amid this chaos, the original goals of the revolution—dignity, freedom, and justice—faced a grave risk of being lost in the fog of war.[12]

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[10] Ibid.

[11] Yassin al-Haj Saleh, *Free Syrians in the Time of Slavery*, 2013.

[12] Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies, "The Trajectory of the Syrian Revolution," 2015.

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Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, Oxford University Press, 2015.

Fabrice Balanche, *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018.

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Part III

Militarization and Internationalization of the Conflict (2012–2016)

12

The Rise and Challenges of the Free Syrian Army

In the early months of the Syrian revolution in 2011, as crowds of protesters chanted for freedom and dignity across the country, the Assad regime escalated its violent repression, deploying the army to crush the peaceful demonstrations. As defections began to surface among soldiers and officers who refused to fire on their fellow citizens, the need for a unified military structure to defend civilians and resist regime violence became apparent. Thus, the name "Free Syrian Army" (FSA) was born—a symbol of armed resistance that would become a central and controversial figure in the revolution.

On July 29, 2011, Colonel Riad al-Asaad, a defected air force officer, appeared in a video from Turkish territory announcing the formation of the Free Syrian Army. Its declared mission was to protect protesters, defend the Syrian people, and work toward toppling the regime. This announcement marked a turning point: the uprising, originally civilian, had gained a military wing. Initially composed of a handful of defected soldiers and officers, the FSA grew steadily as violence spread and regime brutality intensified.[1]

By early 2012, the FSA had an active presence in key areas. In Daraa—the birthplace of the revolution and a hub for early defections—its presence became increasingly visible. Homs and its countryside witnessed heavy fighting and became a stronghold of the FSA. In Idlib, the group benefitted from its proximity to Türkiye, which made it a strategic base for organizing and resupplying. Rural Damascus, including Douma and Eastern Ghouta, also saw fierce battles and sustained

[1] Joseph Holliday, "The Struggle for Syria in 2011," Institute for the Study of War, 2011.

military pressure from regime forces. The FSA initially employed guerrilla tactics—ambushes, raids on regime checkpoints, and sabotage of military installations—to great effect. However, several major challenges soon emerged that would undermine its cohesion and effectiveness.[2]

From the beginning, the FSA lacked a unified command structure. It operated more like a network of semi-autonomous local brigades that coordinated loosely and sometimes competed with one another. Efforts to establish a central leadership—such as the formation of the FSA Military Council—were hindered by political divisions and fragmented sources of funding.[3] Different funders—Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye—often backed separate factions based on ideology, tribal affiliation, or tactical preferences, leading to disjointed strategies and conflicting goals.[4]

FSA units often relied on captured regime weapons or purchases from the black market. Unlike the Assad regime, which received sustained support from Iran and Russia, the FSA's backing from the Gulf and Türkiye was inconsistent, delayed, and often tied to political conditions. Promises of Western aid or arms deliveries often fell through due to fears of extremism among rebel groups, further weakening the FSA's ability to maintain control on the battlefield.[5]

As the conflict expanded, Islamist factions such as Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, and Jabhat al-Nusra emerged with independent funding and recruitment channels. These groups sometimes cooperated with the FSA, but often competed for influence and territory, leading to occasional infighting and undermining the FSA's authority.[6] In some

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[2] Human Rights Watch, "They Burned My Heart: War Crimes in Northern Syria," 2012.

[3] Aron Lund, "The Free Syrian Army Doesn't Exist," Carnegie Middle East Center, 2013.

[4] Emile Hokayem, "Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant," IISS, 2013.

[5] International Crisis Group, "Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition," October 2012.

[6] Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*. Hurst, 2015.

areas, FSA units were pushed aside or absorbed by better-equipped Islamist groups, especially after 2013.

The regime also infiltrated FSA networks with informants and double agents, resulting in assassinations, strategic leaks, and internal mistrust.[7] Some FSA commanders were killed under suspicious circumstances, while others were discredited by leaked recordings or accused of corruption. Simultaneously, Syrian state media launched campaigns to discredit the FSA, painting it as a lawless militia akin to extremist groups. This narrative gained some traction internationally as the opposition became more fragmented.[8]

Despite its fragmentation, the FSA remained a unifying national symbol for many years. It represented the first organized military break from the Assad regime and was widely seen as the armed embodiment of the popular uprising. Its flag flew over liberated towns and its presence reassured local populations resisting tyranny. More than just a fighting force, the FSA played a role in civil governance, helping to establish local councils and civilian administration in areas outside regime control. In some towns, FSA brigades helped manage food distribution, public security, and schools in collaboration with local activists and civil defense teams.[9]

It attempted to project a non-ideological, nationalist identity centered on protecting all Syrians, regardless of sect or background. Some of its statements emphasized unity and democratic transition, hoping to gain support from the international community. However, internal divisions, lack of consistent leadership, and the growing strength of rival groups hindered this vision.[10]

After 2014—with the rise of ISIS and deepening foreign intervention—the FSA began to lose ground. Many of its units were

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[7] Interviews with defected FSA officers in Turkish border towns (2012–2014).

[8] Syrian Network for Human Rights, Annual Reports 2012–2014.

[9] Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies, "The Trajectory of the Syrian Revolution," 2015.

[10] Mohammad Habash, "Syria: The Road of Suffering Toward Freedom," Arab Institution for Studies, 2016.

either dismantled or absorbed into new coalitions such as the Turkish-backed "Euphrates Shield" and the "Southern Front."[11] While the original FSA gradually faded as a national force, its legacy lived on in the struggle for freedom and the aspirations of Syrians seeking liberation from tyranny.

[11] Fabrice Balanche, "Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War," Washington Institute, 2018

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13

The Rise of Islamist Armed Factions in the Syrian Revolution

As the Syrian revolution shifted from peaceful protests in 2011 to open armed conflict by mid-2012, a diverse array of armed groups emerged on the ground. Among the most influential were Islamist factions that adopted religious and ideological slogans in their resistance to the Assad regime. These factions differed markedly from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in their creed, structure, and vision.[1]

Importantly, Islamist factions were not a monolithic bloc. Their objectives, strategies, and ideological frameworks varied widely. Some remained committed to the revolution's goals, while others deviated from its trajectory or engaged in side conflicts that weakened the revolutionary front. Their emergence was a response to the regime's brutal sectarian repression, the failure of moderate opposition forces to unite, and the ideological vacuum left in many marginalized Sunni communities.[2]

Ahrar al-Sham emerged as one of the most prominent national Islamist groups. Founded officially in January 2012 through the merger of several Salafi-jihadi brigades in northern Syria—mainly in Idlib and Hama—Ahrar al-Sham rapidly became one of the largest Islamist factions.[3] It operated in areas including Idlib, Aleppo, and eastern Hama. Founded by leaders like Hassan Aboud (Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi), Muhannad al-Muhammad, and Youssef al-Sarmini, the group promoted a reformist Salafi vision, advocating for an Islamic state through popular

[1] Harmoon Center, "The Islamic Spectrum in the Syrian Revolution: Shifts and Trajectories."

[2] Zaman al-Wasl, "Testimonies from defectors (2012–2015)."

[3] Al Jazeera Documentary, "Salafism in the Syrian Revolution," aired in 2014.

revolution while rejecting allegiance to al-Qaeda.[4] After the mysterious assassination of its leadership in 2014, Ahrar entered a phase of fragmentation and realignment, eventually becoming part of the Turkish-backed National Liberation Front.[5]

Another key faction was **Jabhat al-Nusra**, which brought global jihadist ideology into Syria's battlefield. Formed in late 2011 and publicly announced in January 2012, Nusra was initially backed by the Islamic State of Iraq and served as al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate.[6] Its operations spanned Rural Damascus, Daraa, Idlib, and Aleppo. Led by the elusive Abu Mohammad al-Joulani, Nusra espoused the creation of a transnational Islamic caliphate but sought to portray itself as a disciplined force embedded in the local struggle.[7] It avoided major conflict with FSA factions early on but eventually clashed with them in later years. After breaking with al-Qaeda, it rebranded itself as Jabhat Fath al-Sham, and later as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), attempting to recast its image as a local nationalist Islamist actor.[8]

In Eastern Ghouta, **Jaysh al-Islam** rose to prominence. Formed in 2013 from dozens of Islamist brigades, it evolved from Liwa al-Islam, under the leadership of Zahran Alloush. The group dominated areas like Douma, Arbin, and Saqba. Although Salafi in character, Jaysh al-Islam distanced itself from both al-Qaeda and ISIS, focusing instead on establishing local governance and resisting regime forces.[9] Alloush's assassination in 2015 dealt a severe blow to the group, and by 2018, following a massive Russian-backed assault on Eastern Ghouta, the faction was evacuated to northern Syria.[10]

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[4] Al-Sham Front Foundation, "Archival documentation of Islamist factions in northern Syria."

[5] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Monthly Reports, 2014.

[6] Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 78–86.

[7] Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, pp. 91–103.

[8] Aron Lund, "From Cold War to Civil War: The Fate of Syria's Islamists," Carnegie Middle East Center, 2016.

[9] Orient TV Interviews – Zahran Alloush (2013–2014).

[10] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "Eastern Ghouta Reports," 2018.

Suqour al-Sham, a key rural faction founded in 2011 in Jabal al-Zawiya and Jisr al-Shughur, became known for its grassroots strength and pragmatic stance. Led by Ahmad Issa al-Sheikh, the group navigated alliances with Ahrar al-Sham and later became part of the National Liberation Front.[11] Though Islamist, it maintained a degree of independence from jihadist currents and focused on resisting both regime and extremist encroachment.[12]

Other influential yet less enduring groups included Liwa al-Tawhid in northern Aleppo, founded under Abdelqader Saleh, who was killed in 2013.[13] Ansar al-Sham, Abdullah Azzam Brigades, and Liwa al-Haqq also contributed to the broader Islamist presence in Homs, Latakia, and elsewhere, often coordinating with Ahrar al-Sham or acting autonomously.[14]

Several key factors explain the proliferation of Islamist factions. An ideological vacuum emerged after the revolution's militarization, particularly in communities that had suffered religious and political marginalization for decades.[15] Funding from private Gulf donors flowed disproportionately to religiously branded factions.[16] The failure of the FSA's leadership to establish cohesive command structures opened space for more organized Islamist alternatives. Additionally, the regime's sectarian strategy—framing the conflict as a Sunni revolt against an Alawite-dominated state—provoked an Islamic counter-narrative.[17] Prisons such as Sednaya also played a role, incubating future Islamist leaders radicalized by years of torture and ideological confrontation.[18]

Yet the rise of these factions came with substantial challenges. Despite their early battlefield success and support among conservative populations, internal rivalries and the lack of a unified political vision

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[11] Al-Sham Front Foundation, 2012–2016 archives.

[12] Harmoon Center, 2015 field interviews with Suqour al-Sham affiliates.

[13] Orient TV Interviews – Abdelqader Saleh, 2013.

[14] Syrian Network for Human Rights, "Armed Groups in Syria: 2012–2014."

[15] Lund, *The Fate of Syria's Islamists*, p. 17.

[16] Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, p. 134.

[17] Human Rights Watch, "Torture Archipelago: Inside Sednaya Prison," 2012.

[18] Zaman al-Wasl, "Interviews with released detainees," 2013–2014.

undermined their effectiveness. Infighting—particularly between Jabhat al-Nusra and Jaysh al-Islam—sapped resources and morale.[19] Their conflicting agendas confused external actors and fragmented the revolutionary discourse. Moreover, the manipulation of these groups by regional powers—each seeking to cultivate proxies—further deepened the schisms within the opposition.[20] This chaotic landscape ultimately helped pave the way for the rise of ISIS, which capitalized on the power vacuum and ideological confusion to assert dominance across wide areas of Syria.[21]

[19] Carnegie Middle East Center, "Fragmented Islamism in Syria," 2016.

[20] Al Jazeera Center for Studies, "Proxy Wars in the Levant," 2015.

[21] Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, pp. 201–215.

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14

The Islamic State (ISIS) and the Syrian Revolution

The roots of ISIS trace back to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, when Abu Musab al-Zarqawi established an Iraqi branch of al-Qaeda. Following his death, the group rebranded itself in 2006 as the "Islamic State of Iraq" under Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. After Abu Omar's death in 2010, leadership passed to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who would lead the group into its most infamous chapter.

With the eruption of Syria's revolution in 2011, al-Baghdadi saw a fertile ground for expansion. Syria's deteriorating security, fragmented opposition, and absence of central authority offered ISIS the opportunity to grow. In 2013, al-Baghdadi announced the creation of the "Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham" (ISIS), effectively merging his Iraqi organization with forces operating in Syria. By 2014, ISIS declared the establishment of a "caliphate," and al-Baghdadi crowned himself as its caliph.[1]

ISIS entered Syria from Iraq not as a product of the revolution, but as an opportunistic force exploiting chaos. It rapidly seized territory in eastern and northern Syria, including Raqqa, Deir Ezzor, and parts of Hasakah. The group implemented a reign of terror characterized by public executions, strict enforcement of its version of Islamic law, and a systematic dismantling of local governance structures established by revolutionary forces.[2] Unlike the Free Syrian Army and other opposition factions that emerged from grassroots movements, ISIS had no roots in

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[1] Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, Oxford University Press, 2015.

[2] Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, Princeton University Press, 2016.

the Syrian uprising. Instead, it operated through conquest, subjugation, and the imposition of fear.

ISIS financed its expansion by capturing oil fields, looting grain silos, controlling border crossings, and imposing taxes and extortion. Its brutal and theatrical violence, including beheadings and mass executions, dominated media coverage and overshadowed the legitimate aims of the revolution.[3] Meanwhile, thousands of foreign fighters poured into Syria to join the group, further isolating ISIS ideologically and practically from the Syrian population.

The emergence of ISIS posed a devastating challenge to the revolution. It diverted the attention and energy of opposition factions, who now had to fight on two fronts: against Assad's regime and against an extremist group seeking to dominate their ranks.[4] ISIS targeted and eliminated prominent revolutionary leaders and activists who opposed its presence. These assassinations, often unclaimed but widely attributed to ISIS, sowed fear among communities and further fragmented the opposition.

Among the figures assassinated were Abu Rayan al-Sarmini (FSA, Idlib), Hajji Mare' (Liwa al-Tawhid), Abu Bakr al-Hamawi (Ahrar al-Sham), and Abu Khaled al-Souri (a senior Ahrar leader and al-Qaeda emissary). Media activists such as Ahmad Masalma and Osama al-Hussein were also targeted, often for exposing ISIS atrocities. These killings decapitated local leadership and crippled revolutionary coordination.

ISIS's rise was not accidental nor solely due to its own strength. Several regional and international actors facilitated or failed to prevent its expansion. The Assad regime, for instance, released dozens of jihadist prisoners from Sednaya in the early days of the revolution, many of whom became ISIS leaders. The regime focused its military campaigns

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[3] Hassan Hassan and Michael Weiss, "ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror," *Regan Arts*, 2015.

[4] Ahmad Abazed, "ISIS and the Syrian Revolution: Rise, Impact, and Dismantling," Omran Center, 2017.

on moderate rebels while largely avoiding clashes with ISIS during its initial growth.[5] This allowed the group to expand unchallenged in certain regions, particularly Raqqa.

Iran used the specter of ISIS to justify its intervention in Syria and Lebanon, framing the revolution as a sectarian uprising fueled by takfiri ideology. Western intelligence agencies, particularly in the U.S., were slow to respond to ISIS's emergence despite real-time surveillance and warnings from opposition figures.[6] Their delayed support for moderate rebels created a vacuum ISIS exploited. Soe Gulf-based private donors, initially unaware of the group's trajectory, also funneled resources that ISIS later absorbed.

Regionally, countries like Türkiye initially allowed foreign fighters to cross into Syria, not foreseeing the threat ISIS would pose. Only later, when ISIS conducted attacks on Turkish soil, did policy shift toward a more aggressive stance.

The fall of ISIS, beginning in 2015 and culminating in the collapse of its territorial holdings by 2019, came through sustained international military campaigns. The U.S.-led coalition launched extensive airstrikes, while the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) reclaimed Raqqa and Deir Ezzor with U.S. backing. In Iraq, the group lost its major stronghold of Mosul. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was eventually killed in a U.S. operation in 2019,[7] and ISIS transitioned into a scattered insurgency.

Even in its defeat, ISIS left behind a shattered Syria. The revolutionary cause had been tarnished in global eyes, civil society decimated in many liberated areas, and trust among opposition groups

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[5] Michael Knights, "How Syria's Assad Helped Forge ISIS," *PolicyWatch 2426*, Washington Institute, 2015.

[6] International Crisis Group, "The Dark Side of the Syrian Revolution: The Islamic State and the Fracture of the Opposition," *Middle East Report No. 151*, Oct. 2014.

[7] UN Human Rights Council, "Rule of Terror: Living under ISIS in Syria," *Report A/HRC/25/65*, Feb. 2014.

deeply eroded. ISIS's presence justified foreign intervention, undermined the moral clarity of the uprising, and provided Assad with the perfect propaganda tool.

For Syrians who rose in 2011 calling for dignity, justice, and freedom, ISIS represented a distortion—not a continuation—of their aspirations. Its legacy is not one of revolution, but of regression and ruin. And yet, the revolution endured, insisting that the path to liberation could not be paved with terror, but only with truth, sacrifice, and unity.

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15

Iranian and Russian Intervention – Bolstering the Regime and Ensuring Its Survival

As Syria's uprising escalated into a full-blown war, the Assad regime's grip on power weakened dramatically. By 2013, its survival depended almost entirely on foreign intervention. Two major international powers—Iran and Russia—emerged as the regime's principal backers, each driven by its own geopolitical calculations and regional ambitions. Together, their involvement reshaped the trajectory of the Syrian conflict, crushed revolutionary hopes, and transformed Syria into a battleground for global rivalries.

Iran's Strategic Stake in Syria

From the early days of the revolution, Iran adopted a staunchly pro-Assad stance, treating the uprising not as a domestic Syrian affair but as a direct threat to its regional order. Syria was a vital node in the so-called "Axis of Resistance"—Tehran's ideological and logistical corridor stretching from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon. The collapse of Assad's regime would sever Iran's land bridge to the Mediterranean and unravel decades of strategic investment.[1]

Ideologically, Iran framed its intervention as a defense of oppressed minorities, particularly Alawites and Shiites. Although Alawite beliefs diverge from Twelver Shi'ism, Iran's revolutionary doctrine—intertwining religious identity with statecraft—allowed it to present

[1] Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, "Iran and Syria: Strategic Alliance or Soft Occupation?" Doha, 2018.

Assad's government as a sectarian ally worth defending. The Syrian revolution, led largely by Sunni Muslims, was perceived as a Sunni uprising with the potential to inspire unrest within Iran's own borders, especially in the wake of the 2009 Green Movement. Preserving Assad's rule thus became both a strategic and existential necessity.

Tools of Iranian Intervention

Iran's support for the regime unfolded across multiple arenas: military, financial, intelligence, and media. On the battlefield, Iran's Quds Force, under the command of General Qassem Soleimani, orchestrated a transnational militia campaign.[2] Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon were joined by Iraqi militias such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Harakat al-Nujaba, along with Afghan and Pakistani units under banners like Liwa Fatemiyoun and Liwa Zaynabiyoun. These forces waged brutal campaigns across Homs, Qusayr, Darayya, Aleppo, and Zabadani—often marked by sectarian massacres and the mass displacement of Sunni civilians.

Economically, Iran funneled billions into the Syrian war effort—by some estimates between $20–30 billion—through interest-free loans, fuel shipments, and direct subsidies to the Syrian Central Bank.[3] This financial lifeline stabilized the collapsing Syrian economy and kept the war machine running.

Iran also reshaped Syria's security apparatus, embedding its own intelligence officers and training loyalist paramilitary groups like the National Defense Forces. Surveillance technologies were imported to monitor dissidents, hack online activism, and neutralize grassroots mobilization. Meanwhile, media outlets such as Al-Alam and Al-Mayadeen painted the uprising as a foreign-backed extremist conspiracy, feeding sectarian narratives and delegitimizing civil protest.

The Consequences of Iranian Involvement

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[2] Jusoor Center for Studies, "Iranian Penetration in Syria: Realities and Risks," Istanbul, 2021.

[3] Human Rights Watch, "Iran's Role in Syrian War Crimes," New York, 2020.

Iran's deep-rooted involvement came at a profound cost to Syrian sovereignty and social cohesion. Its sectarian militias transformed the nature of the conflict, injecting religious polarization into what had begun as a democratic uprising. This polarization not only tore apart Syrian society but also spilled across borders, inflaming sectarian tensions in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Gulf.[4]

Beyond the battlefield, Iran entrenched itself institutionally and culturally. In parts of Damascus, Deir Ezzor, and the southern countryside, Tehran built seminaries, cultural centers, and religious schools aimed at shifting the religious identity of local populations. It acquired long-term economic concessions in electricity and phosphate mining, and even secured stakes in critical infrastructure projects—suggesting that its vision extended beyond battlefield victories to long-term influence and soft occupation.

The Iranian presence also drew regional enemies deeper into Syria's war. Israeli airstrikes against Iranian targets in southern Syria and near Damascus became routine, further internationalizing the conflict. In the eyes of many Syrians, Iran had ceased to be a state actor and had become a colonial power—associated not with liberation, but with militias, foreign occupation, and sectarian cleansing.

Russia's Calculated Involvement

If Iran was the engine of Assad's ground war, Russia was the architect of his air supremacy. For Moscow, Syria was both a last bastion of influence in the Arab world and a strategic military foothold. The naval base in Tartus—the only warm-water port available to the Russian navy—was of immense value.[5] So too was the opportunity to challenge Western dominance and showcase Russia's return as a global military power.

Russia feared that Assad's fall could result in either a Western-aligned democracy or an Islamist regime—both threatening outcomes in

[4] Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, "Analysis of Russia's Intervention in Syria: Strategic and Military Dimensions," Istanbul, 2020

[5] Ibid.

Moscow's calculus. Drawing on its experiences in Chechnya and later Ukraine, the Kremlin adopted a doctrine of "stability through force": suppress revolutions, prop up loyal autocrats, and strike hard against dissent.

From 2011 to 2015, Russia shielded Assad diplomatically, vetoing more than a dozen UN Security Council resolutions aimed at holding the regime accountable. But when Assad's military collapse seemed imminent in mid-2015, Russia intervened directly. Airstrikes began in September that year, targeting not ISIS as publicly claimed, but largely moderate opposition strongholds.[6] Cities like Aleppo, Homs, and Eastern Ghouta became testing grounds for Russian firepower, where cluster munitions, thermobaric bombs, and white phosphorus were all reportedly used.

Russia established permanent military bases in Hmeimim and Tartus, deployed the advanced S-400 missile system, and rebuilt the Syrian Air Force. It framed its campaign as a war on terror, using that pretext to justify the bombing of hospitals, bakeries, and schools. Moscow not only supplied Assad with military hardware but also granted him the political cover necessary to commit war crimes with impunity.

Redrawing the Syrian Map

Russia's military intervention marked a turning point. It enabled the regime to retake Aleppo in 2016, Eastern Ghouta in 2018, and Daraa shortly thereafter. These victories came not through reconciliation or political settlement, but through siege, starvation, and carpet bombing. Civilian populations were forced into surrender, often under Russian-brokered "evacuation agreements" that amounted to forced displacement.

The aftermath left Syria effectively under Russian tutelage. Moscow assumed control over portions of the military, economy, and foreign policy. Russian companies secured lucrative contracts in energy and infrastructure, while its generals managed key military zones. What

[6] Ibid.

emerged was not a sovereign Syria, but a vassal state dependent on Russian and Iranian patronage.

A Complex Alliance: Iran and Russia

Though united in saving Assad, Iran and Russia remain uneasy partners. Russia favors a centralized state with formal military structures under its command, while Iran prefers informal militias that answer to Tehran. These conflicting visions have bred quiet competition—over military recruitment, resource control, and reconstruction projects—even if open confrontation has thus far been avoided.

A Regime Revived, A Nation Lost

Together, Russia and Iran succeeded in rescuing the Assad regime. But in doing so, they condemned Syria to more years of war, displacement, and authoritarianism. Their interventions redefined the conflict—not as a revolution against tyranny, but as a proxy war where Syrian aspirations were buried beneath foreign agendas.

For many Syrians, Russia and Iran symbolize not salvation, but occupation and betrayal. The revolutionary dream of 2011 now lies under the rubble of cities bombed by Russian jets and patrolled by Iranian-backed militias. What was once a peaceful uprising for freedom and dignity was transformed—through foreign intervention—into one of the most devastating conflicts of the 21st century.

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16

International Positions and Regional Balances

As the Syrian uprising unfolded, the international response was fragmented, inconsistent, and often contradictory. While many powers expressed rhetorical support for democratic change, their actions—driven by competing interests and strategic hesitations—frequently fell short of meaningful support. This chapter explores how global and regional actors engaged with the Syrian revolution between 2011 and 2024, highlighting how their shifting priorities shaped the course of the conflict.

The United States, initially surprised by the speed of the Arab Spring, adopted a cautious approach. In 2011, President Obama publicly called for Bashar al-Assad to step down following the regime's violent crackdown. However, this strong language was not matched by decisive action. Early U.S. involvement was limited to statements and symbolic gestures. Between 2012 and 2014, covert programs such as the CIA-led "Timber Sycamore"—supported by Saudi Arabia and Qatar—sought to train and arm select opposition groups. Yet these efforts were plagued by political constraints. Fear of arming extremists led to the withholding of advanced weapons, which weakened the effectiveness and cohesion of rebel forces.

The turning point came in 2013 when the Assad regime launched a chemical attack on Eastern Ghouta, killing hundreds. Obama had previously warned that chemical weapons constituted a "red line," yet when the line was crossed, the U.S. backed down from military strikes. Instead, it agreed to a Russian-brokered disarmament deal, damaging

U.S. credibility and signaling to Assad that American threats lacked resolve.[1]

With the rise of ISIS in 2014, U.S. priorities shifted dramatically. Washington reframed the Syrian conflict as a counterterrorism issue, forming a coalition to fight ISIS and backing the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the northeast. This strategic pivot sidelined the Syrian opposition and indirectly supported the Assad regime's survival by focusing resources and attention elsewhere.[2]

Under President Trump (2017–2020), U.S. policy was marked by contradictions. Although Trump ordered limited strikes in response to chemical attacks in Khan Sheikhoun and Douma, these operations were largely symbolic. His decision to withdraw troops from northern Syria in 2019 opened the door to Turkish and Russian incursions, further complicating the conflict. President Biden's administration maintained sanctions, including the Caesar Act, and opposed normalization with Assad. However, it offered little meaningful support to the opposition, and a minimal U.S. troop presence remained in the east, focused solely on ISIS containment.

The European Union adopted a firm diplomatic position against the Assad regime, imposing sanctions, freezing assets, and suspending diplomatic ties. While it provided substantial humanitarian aid to opposition-held areas and Syrian refugees, the EU consistently avoided military engagement. European positions varied: France was vocally supportive of the revolution; Germany focused on refugee containment; and Britain, before Brexit, offered political backing before withdrawing from active engagement. Despite its moral rhetoric, the EU's influence remained limited and closely aligned with U.S. policy, opposing normalization without enforcing meaningful consequences.

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[1] BBC Arabic, "Obama's Red Line: Did the West Abandon the Syrians?" BBC Arabic, June 2017, https://www.bbc.com/arabic

[2] Congressional Research Service, "U.S. Policy Toward Syria, 2012–2023," https://crsreports.congress.gov

Among regional actors, the Gulf states were early and vocal supporters of the revolution, driven by a mix of moral outrage, strategic rivalry with Iran, and aspirations to influence post-Assad Syria. Qatar emerged as a leading advocate, backing political bodies like the Syrian National Council and funding Islamist-leaning factions. Al Jazeera's coverage amplified revolutionary narratives across the Arab world. However, Qatar's unilateral approach and support for specific factions often contributed to fragmentation within the opposition.

Saudi Arabia provided political sponsorship and military aid to groups such as Jaysh al-Islam and the Southern Front, while hosting multiple opposition conferences in Riyadh.[3] Yet it remained cautious about deeper military involvement, preferring to control the political direction of the opposition rather than equip it with decisive firepower. The UAE, initially supportive of diplomatic efforts, shifted its position post-2016. By 2018, it reopened its embassy in Damascus, signaling a return to pragmatic engagement and normalization with Assad.

The Gulf's collective efforts suffered from lack of coordination, internal rivalries, and shifting priorities. Qatar and Saudi Arabia backed competing factions, creating redundancy and inefficiency. No unified operations room was established, which led to corruption and poor strategic planning. As opposition forces began losing ground, especially after the fall of Aleppo and Daraa, Gulf states reassessed their involvement. Revolutionary slogans gave way to calls for stability and regional realignment. Embassies reopened, and Syria's readmission to the Arab League marked a definitive pivot toward normalization.

These shifts reflect a broader pattern of international disengagement. After 2014, most Western and regional powers began reframing the Syrian conflict not as a people's struggle for freedom, but as a security challenge dominated by terrorism, migration, and border control. Justice and accountability were sidelined, while millions of displaced Syrians

[3] Al Jazeera Archives, "Coverage of Gulf Support for Syrian Rebels, 2011–2017," https://www.aljazeera.net

were left to face repression, poverty, and exile. The Syrian revolution became a victim of global hypocrisy and double standards.

In summary, the early enthusiasm of international actors gave way to inertia, disillusionment, and quiet realignment. The United States failed to enforce its own red lines and ultimately prioritized anti-ISIS operations over democratic values. The EU provided aid but avoided real confrontation. The Gulf states, despite their early support, allowed rivalry and fragmentation to undercut the revolution. Together, these inconsistent positions prolonged the conflict, weakened the opposition, and facilitated Assad's return to the regional stage.

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The UAE and the Syrian Revolution: From Support to Normalization

At the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in March 2011, the United Arab Emirates initially aligned itself with the broader Arab consensus that condemned the Assad regime's violent crackdown on peaceful demonstrators. It supported Arab League resolutions, voted to suspend Syria's membership, and closed its embassy in Damascus—sending a clear political message of disapproval.[1] These early moves placed the UAE nominally within the camp of Gulf countries backing the Syrian people's call for freedom and reform.

However, the UAE's engagement remained deliberately limited. Unlike Qatar or Saudi Arabia, which actively funded and armed opposition groups, the UAE avoided military or logistical involvement. Its support was rhetorical rather than operational, shaped more by regional calculations and strategic caution than revolutionary enthusiasm.

As the revolution evolved and Islamist factions began to dominate the opposition landscape, the UAE grew increasingly skeptical of the rebellion. Between 2014 and 2016, this skepticism translated into policy shifts. Islamist factions such as Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam, and Faylaq al-Rahman—many supported by Qatar and Türkiye—were viewed by the UAE as existential threats to regional order.[2] With its longstanding opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood and similar currents, Abu Dhabi began distancing itself from the mainstream opposition.

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[1] Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies "The UAE's Role in the Syrian Revolution: From Caution to Normalization," Doha, 2019. https://www.dohainstitute.org

[2] Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, "Arab States and the Assad Regime: The Case of the UAE," Istanbul, 2021. https://harmoon.org

During this period, the UAE quietly began realigning itself with Russia, which was emerging as Assad's most decisive international backer.[3] Although the UAE did not publicly declare this alignment, its diplomatic language and strategic posture reflected a recalibrated approach—prioritizing anti-Islamist stability over the initial revolutionary demands for democratic change.

By late 2018, the shift was formalized. The UAE reopened its embassy in Damascus, becoming the first Arab state to re-establish diplomatic ties with the Assad regime.[4] This move was framed as an effort to counterbalance Iran's expanding influence in Syria and to "bring Assad back into the Arab fold." Emirati media and officials increasingly adopted a narrative focused on state sovereignty, border security, and stability—portraying normalization as a pragmatic necessity rather than a betrayal of the uprising's principles.

The UAE's engagement with Assad continued to deepen. Public discourse emphasized reconstruction, refugee return, and curbing chaos over justice, accountability, or democratic transition. In doing so, the UAE played a central role in the regional rehabilitation of the regime, helping to pave the way for Syria's readmission into the Arab League and the broader rollback of political isolation imposed since 2011.

One of the most controversial episodes tied to the UAE's role in the conflict came with the 2015 assassination of Zahran Alloush, the leader of Jaysh al-Islam, in a Russian airstrike.[5] Media outlets such as Middle East Eye and Al-Araby Al-Jadeed published reports speculating about possible Emirati intelligence collaboration with Russia.[6] Alloush's Salafi background and his alleged ties to Qatar and Saudi Arabia placed him on Abu Dhabi's ideological radar. While no conclusive evidence has

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[3] Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, "The UAE-Russia Alliance in Syria: Diverging Interests or Tactical Convergence?" 2020. https://www.alaraby.co.uk

[4] Reuters, "UAE reopens embassy in Damascus after seven years," December 2018.

[5] *The Guardian*, "Zahran Alloush death weakens Syrian rebels," December 2015.

[6] Middle East Eye, "Did the UAE fund Russia's role in Syria? Behind the Scenes of Assad's Survival."

emerged linking the UAE directly to the strike, the timing and political context led to speculation about covert coordination.

In sum, the UAE's trajectory in Syria reflects a broader strategic doctrine: contain, stabilize, and neutralize perceived ideological threats. From early rhetorical support to eventual normalization with Assad, the UAE's actions prioritized regime preservation over revolutionary outcomes. Though it avoided overt military intervention, Abu Dhabi's behind-the-scenes diplomacy helped reshape the regional approach to Syria—facilitating the regime's reintegration while the dreams of the revolution were left unrealized.

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The Humanitarian Catastrophe and the Syrian Refuge Crisis

The Syrian revolution, which began with peaceful demands for dignity and freedom in 2011, quickly devolved into one of the worst humanitarian catastrophes of the 21st century. As the regime responded with escalating violence, civilians were caught in a storm of airstrikes, sieges, forced displacement, and international apathy. The result was a shattered society, millions displaced or exiled, and a generation robbed of safety and stability.

As the conflict intensified, over seven million Syrians became internally displaced, forced to flee their homes under bombardment and regime advances. Many sought shelter in opposition-controlled areas in northern Syria, especially in Idlib and rural Aleppo. Yet these havens were anything but safe, as Russian and regime airstrikes regularly targeted displacement camps and civilian infrastructure. Makeshift shelters, exposed to freezing winters and sweltering summers, became sites of repeated suffering. Families were uprooted multiple times, constantly fleeing to escape death, only to face hunger, disease, and neglect in under-resourced camps. The map of Syria was redrawn not only by military fronts, but by the shifting flows of human misery.[1]

Beyond Syria's borders, the crisis took on global proportions. Over 6.8 million Syrians fled the country, creating the largest displacement crisis in modern memory. Türkiye absorbed the largest share—over 3.6 million refugees. Lebanon, with its fragile economy and sectarian politics, took in nearly a million, placing immense strain on public services and social cohesion. Jordan provided relative stability, hosting hundreds of thousands in camps like Zaatari. As conditions in these host countries

[1] ReliefWeb/UNOCHA, "Syria Crisis Overview."

worsened, countless Syrians sought refuge farther afield—risking death at sea, crossing borders on foot, or falling into the hands of traffickers. The year 2015 marked a turning point: the world watched in horror as images of drowned children and desperate families flooded the media. Syria's tragedy had become a global moral test.[2]

Inside Syria, the war tore apart the physical fabric of the nation. Aerial bombardments flattened entire neighborhoods in Aleppo, Homs, Daraa, and the Damascus suburbs. Over 70% of schools and healthcare facilities were rendered inoperable.[3] Syria's professional class—teachers, doctors, engineers—fled in large numbers, creating a vacuum that crippled recovery. Water infrastructure, power grids, and sanitation systems collapsed, leaving millions in urban and rural areas alike without access to the most basic services. The country's infrastructure became a symbol of its humanitarian collapse—crumbling roads, silent hospitals, empty schools, and dark cities abandoned by the world.[4]

One of the regime's most brutal tactics was the use of sieges to subdue opposition-held areas. Cities like Eastern Ghouta, Madaya, Darayya, and Old Homs were encircled, starved, and bombed. Food and medicine were blocked. Children died of hunger. Desperate civilians foraged for grass and leaves. Diseases spread as sanitation broke down completely.[5] Images of emaciated children and desperate parents circulated globally, highlighting the silent massacre unfolding in these zones. Humanitarian convoys were often denied access, and aid deliveries—when allowed—were tightly controlled by the regime. These sieges were not simply tactics of war; they were instruments of collective punishment.

Between 2013 and 2015, Syria became the epicenter of a regional and global contest. What began as a popular uprising morphed into a proxy

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[2] UNHCR. *Syria Emergency*. https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html

[3] International Crisis Group, "Syria Reports and Analysis," https://www.crisisgroup.org

[4] BBC News and Al Jazeera Archives, Coverage of the Syrian War and Refugee Crisis.

[5] Human Rights Watch, "Siege and Starvation in Syria."

war. The emergence of ISIS in 2014 changed the trajectory entirely. With its brutal tactics and territorial ambitions, ISIS drew global attention and shifted Western priorities from regime change to counterterrorism. The U.S.-led coalition launched a military campaign focused on defeating ISIS, relying primarily on the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). This alienated many in the Arab opposition, who felt abandoned by the international community.[6]

At the same time, Iran deepened its military footprint, deploying militias from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan to fight alongside Assad's forces. In September 2015, Russia intervened directly, launching air campaigns that targeted both extremist groups and opposition factions. Aleppo, Ghouta, and Homs were relentlessly bombed, resulting in thousands of civilian deaths.[7]

The Syrian battlefield became a maze of foreign involvement: the U.S. and its allies fighting ISIS, Russia and Iran shoring up the regime, Türkiye engaging in cross-border operations, and Gulf states backing selected opposition groups. Peace initiatives faltered amid competing agendas. The war dragged on, the suffering multiplied, and the world's moral resolve faltered.

The humanitarian toll remains staggering: millions uprooted, tens of thousands missing or detained, and entire cities erased. A generation of Syrian children has grown up in tents, bomb shelters, or foreign lands—without education, without stability, and often without hope. The Syrian crisis stands as a tragic testament to what happens when the world watches a nation burn and fails to stop the fire.[8]

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[6] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR). https://www.syriahr.com

[7] International Crisis Group, "Syria Reports and Analysis."

[8] UNHCR, *Syria Emergency*

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Part IV

Regime Atrocities Against Civilians During the Uprising

19

Regime Atrocities Against Civilians During the Uprising

From the very first chants for freedom and dignity in March 2011, the Assad regime met the Syrian people with bullets. What began as peaceful demonstrations soon turned into one of the bloodiest and most prolonged campaigns of state-sponsored violence in modern history. The regime responded to protests with live fire, torture, and arrests. As the uprising intensified, Assad's forces escalated their response into systematic massacres, sieges, and air campaigns. The Syrian landscape was transformed into a theater of annihilation, where every weapon of war—conventional, improvised, and banned—was deployed against civilian populations.[1]

The brutality unleashed by the Assad regime was neither accidental nor limited to the heat of combat. It was part of a deliberate, organized campaign to crush dissent, depopulate rebellious areas, and terrorize the broader population into submission. Barrel bombs were dropped from helicopters onto marketplaces and apartment buildings. Hospitals and schools were deliberately bombed. Entire neighborhoods were reduced to rubble. According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), more than 230,000 civilians were killed by regime forces between 2011 and 2024—most of them in opposition-held or formerly liberated areas.[2]

The first mass atrocity occurred in Daraa in March 2011, where regime forces opened fire on unarmed protesters emerging from Friday prayers at al-Omari Mosque. At least 100 civilians were killed during the first week. Among the early victims was 13-year-old Hamza al-Khatib,

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[1] BBC and Al Jazeera Archives, Reports on Syrian Massacres and Russian Airstrikes.

[2] Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR). https://snhr.org

whose tortured body—returned to his family—became a symbol of the regime's cruelty. This set the tone for what was to come.

In February 2012, the Baba Amr neighborhood of Homs was besieged and subjected to relentless artillery shelling and ground assaults by Assad's forces and allied Shabiha militias. Over 700 civilians were killed in three weeks. Other large-scale massacres soon followed: the Houla massacre in May 2012 claimed more than 100 lives, many of them children; in August 2012, the Darayya massacre left around 700 civilians dead after regime forces stormed the town.[3]

One of the most heinous crimes of the war took place on August 21, 2013, in Eastern Ghouta. Regime forces launched rockets filled with the nerve agent sarin into the neighborhoods of Zamalka and Ain Tarma. Over 1,100 civilians, most of them women and children, died in their sleep.[4] This blatant use of chemical weapons shocked the world but did not alter the trajectory of the war. Assad faced no meaningful consequences.

From late 2013 through early 2014, the regime intensified its use of barrel bombs—improvised explosives dropped from helicopters—particularly on Eastern Aleppo. In just over a year, more than 2,500 civilians were killed in Aleppo alone. The indiscriminate nature of these attacks not only caused mass casualties but also triggered waves of displacement, as entire neighborhoods emptied in terror.[5]

In September 2015, Russia entered the war on Assad's side. Russian airpower gave the regime a decisive edge, and the scale of destruction escalated dramatically. In the first few months of Russian involvement, dozens of hospitals, schools, and marketplaces were bombed. Among the most devastating strikes were the bombing of Al-Rahma Hospital in Ma'arrat al-Nu'man in November 2015, killing 15, and the December

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[3] United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria. https://www.ohchr.org

[4] Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Chemical Weapons Attacks," https://www.hrw.org

[5] Amnesty International, "Sieges and Starvation in Syria," https://www.amnesty.org

airstrike on a crowded market in Douma that left 40 civilians dead.[6] These strikes constituted clear war crimes under international law.

The joint Russian-Assad siege of Eastern Aleppo from July to December 2016 marked a turning point in the war. The city was encircled, bombed with bunker busters, white phosphorus, and cluster munitions. Humanitarian corridors were repeatedly targeted, and food supplies were cut off. Over 1,000 civilians were killed, and 35,000 forcibly displaced in what became one of the largest episodes of urban ethnic cleansing in the war.

A similar fate awaited Eastern Ghouta in early 2018. After years of siege and deprivation, the regime, backed by Russian airpower and Iranian proxy militias like Hezbollah and the Zainabiyoun Brigade, launched an overwhelming military assault. In 40 days, over 1,400 civilians were killed and 45,000 were displaced. Chlorine gas was reportedly used multiple times during the offensive.[7]

In 2019, the focus shifted to Idlib province—the last major opposition stronghold. Between April and December, regime and Russian forces bombed towns like Khan Sheikhoun and Ma'arrat al-Nu'man, killing around 1,000 civilians and displacing over 600,000. Schools, hospitals, and refugee shelters were deliberately targeted to maximize suffering and break the will of the population.

Even in areas where reconciliation agreements were signed under Russian guarantees, atrocities continued. In August 2021, regime forces stormed Daraa al-Balad after residents protested the failure of the reconciliation terms. Dozens were killed, and hundreds arrested in raids that broke both the agreements and the trust of communities that had surrendered under international guarantees.

Meanwhile, in areas still outside regime control, such as Idlib and rural Aleppo, the campaign of terror continued. In 2022, Russian airstrikes hit refugee camps in Kafr Jales, killing ten civilians. In 2023, an airstrike destroyed Atarib Hospital, killing seven, including medical staff.

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[6] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR). https://www.syriahr.com

[7] Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Attacks on Eastern Ghouta."

In 2024, an Iranian drone targeted the Syrian Civil Defense headquarters in Idlib. These were not isolated incidents but part of a sustained strategy to keep liberated areas unlivable and under constant threat.[8]

From 2011 to 2024, the regime's campaign evolved from brutal repression to calculated extermination. Cities were besieged, neighborhoods wiped off the map, and entire populations uprooted. The Assad regime, with full backing from Iran and Russia, turned state institutions into engines of terror. What began as peaceful chants for dignity ended in scorched earth, chemical warfare, and a legacy of mass graves.

[8] International Crisis Group, *Syria Reports and Conflict Updates*. https://www.crisisgroup.org

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Chemical Atrocities in Syria: A War Without Red Lines

The Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons stands as one of the starkest symbols of its unrestrained brutality during the civil war. While war crimes across history have often involved indiscriminate violence, the repeated deployment of banned chemical agents by a sitting government against its own population shattered even the lowest expectations of international norms. The Assad regime did not merely use chemical weapons once or in isolation—it turned them into a strategic tool of mass terror, deliberately targeting residential areas, civilian shelters, and field hospitals in rebel-held, Sunni-majority regions.

Among the most horrifying instances was the sarin gas massacre in Eastern Ghouta on August 21, 2013. In the pre-dawn hours, regime rockets armed with the deadly nerve agent struck the neighborhoods of Zamalka, Ain Tarma, and Mu'adamiyat al-Sham. Within minutes, victims began to convulse, foam at the mouth, and collapse into respiratory failure. Entire families died in their sleep. Makeshift hospitals were overwhelmed, and medics—unprotected and unequipped—were forced to treat patients with vinegar and water. The death toll reached approximately 1,429, including hundreds of children, making it the deadliest chemical attack of the century. Global shock followed, but concrete international action did not. Instead, a U.S.–Russia-brokered deal led to the partial dismantling of Syria's declared chemical stockpile. Years later, it became clear that this disarmament was neither complete nor enforced.[1]

[1] Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), "Report on the Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in the Ghouta Area of Damascus," August 2013, https://www.opcw.org

Chemical attacks continued, with one of the most infamous occurring in Khan Sheikhoun, Idlib province, on April 4, 2017. Assad's warplanes dropped munitions containing sarin gas on a crowded marketplace and nearby homes. Over 90 people were killed, among them 33 children and 18 women. Survivors described an unbearable stench, the sensation of suffocating from the inside, and the chaos of watching loved ones die in agony. The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) conducted a detailed investigation and confirmed the use of sarin, attributing responsibility directly to the Syrian regime.[2]

On April 7, 2018, the town of Douma in Eastern Ghouta witnessed another horrific chapter. As the final stronghold in the Damascus suburbs resisted regime siege, Assad's helicopters dropped chlorine-filled barrels on residential buildings. Over 40 civilians, mostly women and children, were killed as the gas seeped into underground shelters. Footage showed families sprawled on floors with foaming mouths and wide-open eyes—images that once again shook the world but failed to provoke serious accountability. OPCW investigations later affirmed regime culpability.[3]

These major incidents were not anomalies. From 2013 to 2018, watchdog groups including the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) documented over 200 chemical attacks across the country.[4] Smaller towns such as Saraqib, Khan al-Asal, Kafr Zita, and Harasta were repeatedly hit with chlorine bombs and other agents, often in the wake of military losses or in conjunction with sieges. Though chlorine is less lethal than sarin, its effect in confined spaces is devastating—causing asphyxiation, panic, and slow death.

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[2] Human Rights Watch, "Death by Chemicals: The Syrian Government's Systematic Use of Chemical Weapons," 2017, https://hrw.org

[3] Amnesty International, "Syria: Poison Gas Attack Shows Continued War Crimes," April 2018, https://amnesty.org

[4] Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), "The Syrian Regime Used Chemical Weapons in 217 Attacks," 2023, https://snhr.org

A disturbing pattern emerged: nearly all chemical attacks targeted Sunni-majority areas that had risen against the regime. This pointed not only to military objectives, but to sectarian messaging—punishing entire communities seen as disloyal. Analysts and investigators noted that these attacks were rarely followed by international consequences. The Assad regime, protected by Russian vetoes in the UN Security Council and bolstered by Iranian intelligence and logistical support, tested global red lines and found them flexible.[5]

Chemical weapons were not just tools of terror; they became part of a psychological war. Each attack broadcast a message: no place is safe, and no act will be punished. The effect on survivors has been long-lasting. Beyond the physical toll, many still suffer from chronic neurological damage, permanent lung scarring, and deep psychological trauma. Families were destroyed not only in a moment of exposure but in the years that followed, as victims dealt with social isolation, financial ruin, and the loss of entire kinship networks.

International bodies such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry, and the OPCW have consistently held the Syrian regime responsible for the vast majority of chemical attacks in Syria. Despite this consensus, no serious international legal accountability has been enforced to date. The regime remains in power, and its leaders continue to walk freely, even as new evidence surfaces and survivors speak out.

The use of chemical weapons in Syria represents more than isolated war crimes—it symbolizes the collapse of international deterrence mechanisms and the triumph of impunity. It is a stain not only on the Assad regime but on the conscience of the international community.

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[5] United Nations, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, A/HRC/43/57, March 2020, https://www.ohchr.org

Date	Location	Weapon Used	Death Toll	Notes
Aug 21, 2013	Eastern Ghouta (Zamalka, Ain Tarma, Mu'adamiyat al-Sham)	Sarin Gas	Approx. 1,429	Deadliest chemical attack; global outrage, limited international response
Apr 4, 2017	Khan Sheikhoun, Idlib	Sarin Gas	Over 90	Marketplace hit; OPCW confirmed regime responsibility
Apr 7, 2018	Douma, Eastern Ghouta	Chlorine Gas	Over 40	Barrels dropped on residential buildings; families suffocated
2013–2018 (multiple incidents)	Saraqib, Khan al-Asal, Kafr Zita, Harasta, others	Mostly Chlorine	Varied; total over 200 attacks documented	Widespread attacks in rebel-held Sunni areas; regime consistently denied use

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https://syriahr.com

Violations Documentation Center (VDC) – Victim records, substances used, and responsible parties
https://vdc-sy.net

Al-Araby Al-Jadeed – *"Douma: Death from the Sky"* (April 2018)
https://alaraby.co.uk

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https://www.ohchr.org

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https://www.opcw.org

Human Rights Watch – *Death by Chemicals: The Syrian Government's Systematic Use of Chemical Weapons* (2017)
https://hrw.org

Amnesty International – *Syria: Poison Gas Attack Shows Continued War Crimes* (April 2018)
https://amnesty.org

Bellingcat – Open-source analysis of missile trajectories and visual evidence
https://bellingcat.com

The New York Times Visual Investigations – Douma 2018 chemical attack reports
https://nytimes.com/visual-investigations

21

The Tragedies of Aleppo and Eastern Ghouta: Crimes That Shook the World's Conscience

During the years of the Syrian revolution, Aleppo and Eastern Ghouta emerged as twin symbols of endurance and devastation. Both stood as strongholds of popular defiance against one of the most ruthless military campaigns of the 21st century. Their stories are not just tales of resistance but harrowing accounts of systematic annihilation carried out by the Assad regime, aided by sectarian militias under Iranian patronage and shielded by Russian military power. In these two locations, Russia executed its modern-era doctrine of "scorched earth" warfare on civilian populations, setting precedents of impunity and brutality.

The tragedy of Aleppo began in 2012 when the revolution spread to Syria's largest city. Once dubbed the country's economic capital, Aleppo had largely remained quiet in the early months of the uprising. But by mid-2012, it erupted. The Free Syrian Army gained control over eastern neighborhoods such as Salah al-Din, Hanano, al-Sakhour, and Tariq al-Bab. The regime held onto the western half, transforming Aleppo into a divided battleground. A war of attrition followed, escalating into a humanitarian catastrophe after Russia's direct intervention in September 2015. Airstrikes intensified. Barrel bombs became a daily reality. Hospitals, markets, and schools were obliterated. The al-Quds Hospital, supported by Médecins Sans Frontières, was bombed in a high-profile strike.[1] Between July and December 2016, eastern Aleppo was encircled and starved. Food, medicine, and electricity were cut off. The United Nations and Red Cross were denied access. At the end of this horrific

[1] Médecins Sans Frontières, "East Aleppo: A City Without Hospitals," Nov. 2016.

siege, over 35,000 people were forcibly displaced in what came to be known as "the dignity slaughter agreement."[2] Civilians left through green buses under the watch of Russian soldiers. The city that once stood as a cradle of civilization lay in ruins.

Eastern Ghouta, just outside Damascus, endured an even longer and more torturous siege. From 2012 until its fall in 2018, the enclave of opposition-held towns—Douma, Zamalka, Arbin, Saqba, and Hammouriyah—suffered under a regime-imposed blockade. Food, medicine, and fuel were restricted or prohibited. Smuggling tunnels became lifelines. International aid was sporadic and often blocked. The siege was marked by the infamous August 2013 sarin gas massacre, where over 1,400 people—many of them children—died in their sleep.[3] Ghouta became synonymous with chemical warfare and silent death. In early 2018, a final Russian-backed offensive shattered the enclave. In just over six weeks, more than 2,500 people were killed, and over 45,000 were forcibly transferred north.[4] Doctors recalled performing surgeries without anesthesia. Families suffocated in basements as chlorine gas seeped in. The fall of Ghouta, like Aleppo before it, went unpunished.

Together, these two tragedies underscored the international community's failure. Despite conclusive evidence of war crimes, justice never came. Russian vetoes paralyzed the UN Security Council. Aleppo's fall marked a strategic turning point—where the regime, backed by Russia, shifted from defense to reconquest.[5] Ghouta's chemical massacre marked the collapse of international red lines. The targeting of Sunni-majority areas raised serious concerns of sectarian intent. In both cases, hospitals and humanitarian institutions became military targets.[6] The regime and its allies tested the world's limits—and found none.

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[2] "Inside Aleppo: The Final Days of the Syrian Rebellion," The Guardian, Dec. 2016.

[3] BBC Panorama, "Syria's Chemical War, 2018."

[4] Amnesty International, "We Leave or We Die: Forced Displacement under Siege in Eastern Ghouta," 2018.

[5] Human Rights Watch, "Death from the Sky: Deliberate and Indiscriminate Air Strikes on Civilians," 2017.

[6] United Nations, "Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Syria," Feb. 2018.

For Syrians, Aleppo and Ghouta remain enduring scars. They symbolize not just loss, but betrayal—by the world powers, the international legal order, and the promises of human rights. These tragedies planted seeds of despair and extremism, contributing to the unraveling of Syria's social fabric. They are cautionary tales for the future: of what happens when accountability is sacrificed for political expediency, and when war crimes are normalized.

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22

Prisons of Death: The Assad Regime's Atrocities Behind Bars

A Prison-State, Not a State of Law

Since the Ba'athist coup in 1963 and Hafez al-Assad's subsequent rise to power in 1970, Syria has functioned not as a state of law, but as a state of prisons. The security apparatus became the backbone of governance, relying on arbitrary detention, systematic torture, and enforced disappearances. Over time, the prison system evolved into a machinery of daily torment and physical liquidation, particularly targeting members of the Sunni majority.

From the earliest days of the 2011 uprising, the regime responded not only with bullets in the streets but with torture chambers behind closed doors. Syrian prisons ceased to be punitive institutions and instead became centers of mass extermination. The "Caesar photos" leak in 2014 would later offer horrifying glimpses into this reality, revealing only a fraction of the untold crimes.[1]

I. Map of Prisons and Detention Centers in Syria

Syria hosts over 60 major detention centers and central prisons, administered by various branches of the intelligence and security forces:

General Intelligence Directorate (State Security)

Military Intelligence Directorate

Air Force Intelligence

Political Security Directorate

Military Police

[1] Al Jazeera Investigations, "Caesar: The Silent Witness," 2020.

Notorious Detention Facilities:

Province	Facility	Supervising Agency
Damascus	Saydnaya Military Prison	Military Police / Military Intel
Damascus	Branch 215 (The Region Branch)	Military Intelligence
Damascus	Palestine Branch (Branch 235)	Military Intelligence
Homs	Homs Central Prison	Military Police
Hama	Hama Central Prison	Political Security
Aleppo	Branch 290	Military Intelligence
Aleppo	Aleppo Central Prison	General Prison Administration
Idlib	Political Security Branch	Political Security
Daraa	Military Intel. Branch / Khirbet Ghazaleh	Military Intelligence
Deir ez-Zor	State Security Branch	State Security

Mezzeh Military Prison (Damascus): Once infamous under Hafez al-Assad's rule for liquidating political opponents, including Islamists, dissident officers, and rival Ba'athists. It was closed in the 1990s but remains a symbol of Assadist terror.

Tadmur Prison (Palmyra) – "Hell on Earth"

Site of the infamous Tadmur Massacre (June 27, 1980), where over 1,000 inmates were slaughtered in a single night following a failed assassination attempt on Hafez al-Assad.

Known for unspeakable torture: electric shocks, burning, nail removal, beatings to death, and forced inmate-on-inmate torture.

Closed in 2001, reopened during the revolution, and later destroyed by ISIS in 2015.

Sednaya Prison – "The Human Slaughterhouse"

Located north of Damascus, Sednaya is described by Amnesty International as the most horrific prison in modern times.

Divided into two wings: the Red Building (maximum security) and the White Building (for military personnel).

Post-2011, it became a primary site of mass torture and executions.

Amnesty International's 2017 report, *Human Slaughterhouse*, detailed:

The systematic hanging of 5,000 to 13,000 detainees between 2011 and 2015.[2]

Weekly hangings of 20 to 50 prisoners, conducted secretly at night.

Bodies transported in trucks to mass graves under cover of darkness.

II. Methods of Torture and Abuse

Testimonies from survivors and rights groups confirm that Syrian prisons are centers of sadistic torture. Common techniques include:

Hanging (Shabeh): Victims are suspended by their arms for hours or days.

The Flying Carpet (Basat al-Rih): The prisoner is tied to a flexible board and beaten into unconsciousness.

The Tire (Dulab): The victim is forced into a vehicle tire and beaten.

Electric shocks to genitals.

Sexual assault and rape against both men and women.

Deliberate starvation, solitary confinement in claustrophobic cells.

[2] Amnesty International, "Human Slaughterhouse," 2017.

Murder under torture, with death falsely attributed to natural causes.

Some detainees were held for over 15 years without charge or trial, erased from legal existence.[3]

III. The Caesar Files

In 2014, the world was shaken by the release of over 55,000 photographs smuggled by a Syrian military defector known as "Caesar."

These images documented at least 11,000 bodies—many emaciated, burned, and mutilated.

Most were taken at Branch 215 in Damascus.

Caesar's files were later presented before the U.S. Congress, the European Parliament, and international exhibitions as evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity.[4]

IV. The Numbers: Detainees and the Disappeared

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), by the end of 2023:

Over 155,000 people remain detained or forcibly disappeared.

Over 14,000 documented deaths occurred under torture.

99% of enforced disappearances and torture cases were perpetrated by regime forces.[5]

V. Mass Graves – Silence Unearthed

Najha Cemetery (Damascus Countryside): Believed to be a mass grave site for Saydnaya victims, identified through satellite imagery.

Kafr Batna Hill, Old Harasta, Mu'adamiyyat al-Sham: Contain victims of field executions and prison killings.

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[3] Syrian Observer, "Syrian Prisons: Engine of Fear and Disappearance," 2021.
[4] "Caesar: The Syrian Who Risked Everything," The Guardian, January 20, 2014.
[5] Syrian Network for Human Rights, "Detainee and disappearance databases, (2011–2023)."

Tadmur Mass Grave: Discovered after ISIS's retreat from Palmyra, revealing hundreds of secret executions.[6]

VI. Survivor Testimonies – "Daily Death"

One survivor called Sednaya "a dark pit where humanity ceases to exist—only executioners and echoes of death remain."

Female survivors from Branch 251 and Palestine Branch spoke of rape, forced abortion, and denial of medical care during pregnancy.

Many prisoners were executed after being tricked into signing false release papers, vanishing without a trace.

VII. The Purpose of the Prison Apparatus

To crush dissent and instill terror across Syrian society.

To exact sectarian revenge on the Sunni majority.

To silence even non-political critics through fear.

To alter demographics by enforced disappearance and execution.

The Assad regime built a state within a state—a carceral dictatorship where loyalty ensures survival, and dissent is met with extermination. Sednaya and Tadmur are not merely prisons; they are monuments to a regime that murders in the name of sovereignty.

VIII. Legal Accountability and International Silence

Despite overwhelming evidence, no senior regime figure has faced international prosecution due to:

Russia's repeated use of its veto in the UN Security Council.

Weakness of global mechanisms for prosecuting crimes by sovereign states.

The International Criminal Court's limited jurisdiction without Security Council referral.

[6] UN Commission of Inquiry: Reports on torture and mass graves.

However, some European courts have begun trials against former regime officials under universal jurisdiction, such as in Germany and France.

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Part V

Iran in Syria: The Sectarian Project and Regional Domination (2011–2024)

23

The History of Iranian Influence in Syria

Iran was not a peripheral actor in the Syrian war—it was one of the most central and active forces shaping the military and political landscape since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in March 2011. Tehran's intervention was not a reaction to a distressed ally calling for help. Rather, it was part of a calculated, long-term project of regional hegemony, masked under the rhetoric of "resistance" and executed through structured sectarian and military instruments.

This chapter traces the historical roots of Iran's influence in Syria, examines the motives and methods of Iranian intervention, and documents its profound and destructive effects on the Syrian people, the country's social fabric, and the broader future of the Middle East.

I. Early Ties: Syria and Iran Before 1979

Contrary to popular belief, relations between Syria and Iran began taking shape even before the 1979 Islamic Revolution. During the rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Iran maintained diplomatic and economic ties with Syria. However, these relations remained limited and strained, especially due to Syria's alignment with Soviet interests and its anti-Western, pan-Arab orientation under Hafez al-Assad, who seized power in 1970. The Shah's regime was staunchly pro-Western, pro-Israel, and monarchist—values that clashed with Ba'athist ideology.

Hafez al-Assad chose not to deeply align with other major Arab states such as Egypt or Saudi Arabia. Egypt had pivoted toward peace with Israel under Anwar Sadat, and Saudi Arabia represented the conservative Gulf monarchies whose religious and political ideologies were fundamentally at odds with Ba'athist secularism. Assad also feared

the pan-Arab ambitions of Iraq under Saddam Hussein, leading him to seek alternative strategic partners.

This strategic calculus made post-revolutionary Iran a natural ally. After 1979, the ideological landscape of the region shifted: Iran became anti-Zionist and anti-American, aligning rhetorically and strategically with Assad's Syria. The regime in Damascus found in the new Islamic Republic of Iran a partner that shared its adversaries and could bolster its regional standing.[1]

II. Foundations of the Iran-Syria Alliance

The alliance between Hafez al-Assad and revolutionary Iran began in earnest after 1979. Assad was the only Arab leader to side with Iran during the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), while the rest of the Arab world, particularly the Gulf states, supported Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Syria provided Iran with political, logistical, and military support, helping break the Arab isolation Tehran faced.[2]

This alignment was not merely opportunistic. It was driven by a shared hostility toward Iraq, deep mistrust of U.S. and Israeli influence, and a mutual desire to expand regional influence. Over time, Iran and Syria built a strategic axis, with Iran viewing Syria as a gateway to the Levant and a conduit to its Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah.[3]

Under Bashar al-Assad, the alliance deepened, particularly after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, which created a regional vacuum. The outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011 marked a critical juncture where Iran moved from strategic partner to occupying force.[4]

III. Iran's Motives in Syria

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[1] Jubin M. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East,* (I.B. Tauris, 2006), pp. 41–45.

[2] Fred H. Lawson, "Syria's Relations with Iran," *The Middle East Journal* 59, no. 2 (2005): 254–269.

[3] Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, (University of California Press, 1989), pp. 363–366.

[4] Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad* (Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 209–212.

Iran's involvement in Syria was driven by overlapping geopolitical, ideological, and sectarian objectives:

Preserving the Tehran–Baghdad–Damascus–Beirut Axis: Syria served as the linchpin in Iran's land corridor to Hezbollah. Losing Damascus would sever this critical supply route and severely weaken Iranian influence in Lebanon.[5]

Preventing a Sunni-Dominated, Democratic Syria: Iran feared that the fall of Assad might usher in a government aligned with Sunni Arab interests, or worse, a democracy responsive to its people—an existential threat to Iran's autocratic model.

Expanding Shiite Influence: Syria became a battleground for Iran's larger project of exporting Wilayat al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist) and embedding political Shiism across the Arab world.[6]

Securing a Strategic Foothold in the Arab Heartland: Syria offered Tehran a launchpad to influence Palestinian politics, threaten Israel, and project power toward the Gulf.[7]

IV. Tools of Intervention: Sectarian Militias and Arms

Iran's intervention began with the deployment of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) "advisers" but quickly escalated into a full-scale proxy war, with thousands of fighters flooding in from across the Shiite world.[8]

Major Iranian-aligned militias include:

Hezbollah (Lebanon): Openly entered the war in 2012, committing atrocities in Qusayr, Qalamoun, and Aleppo.[9]

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[5] Daniel Byman, "Iran's Role in Syria," Brookings Institution, 2019.

[6] Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (W. W. Norton, 2006), pp. 215–218.

[7] Frederic Wehrey et al., *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent* (RAND Corporation, 2009), pp. 94–96.

[8] Human Rights Watch, "Death Everywhere: War Crimes and Violations in Aleppo," 2016.

[9] Ibid.

Liwa Fatemiyoun: Afghan Shiite militia recruited and funded by Iran, deployed in large numbers.

Liwa Zainabiyoun: Pakistani Shiite militia trained for urban warfare.

National Defense Forces (Syria): A paramilitary force created, trained, and financed by Iran.

IRGC and Quds Force: Directed key battles, particularly around Damascus and southern Syria.[10]

V. Devastating Impact on Syria

Sectarianism and Demographic Engineering: Iran-backed militias enforced a sectarian cleansing campaign, particularly in Sunni-majority areas like East Ghouta, Homs, and Deir ez-Zor. Hundreds of thousands were forcibly displaced, and Shiite families from Iraq and Afghanistan were resettled in their place in a policy of "demographic reconfiguration."[11]

Social Fragmentation: Iran's involvement deepened Syria's sectarian rifts, turning a political uprising into a sectarian war. It inflamed Sunni-Shiite tensions and dismantled the fragile social fabric.

War Crimes and Atrocities: Iranian-backed militias were implicated in massacres such as those in Qusayr, Zabadani, Yarmouk Camp, Eastern Aleppo, and Douma. Numerous reports documented extrajudicial killings, torture, mass displacement, and the torching of civilian homes.[12]

Subversion of Syrian Sovereignty: As the war progressed, Iran embedded itself into the Syrian state's security and intelligence apparatus.

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[10] Aymenn J. al-Tamimi, "The Fatemiyoun Division," Middle East Institute, 2020.

[11] Carter Center, "Demographic Engineering in Homs and Damascus," 2018.

[12] Amnesty International, "We Leave or We Die," 2017.

Its embassy in Damascus began to wield greater influence than Syria's ministries of defense or interior.[13]

VI. Popular Syrian Response

The Syrian people, especially in opposition areas, overwhelmingly viewed Iran as an occupying force. Slogans against Iran and its ideology proliferated at protests, particularly after the sectarian atrocities committed by its proxies. Despite efforts to use local collaborators and cultural initiatives, Iran failed to gain meaningful grassroots support.

Prominent religious figures, such as Shaykh Usama al-Rifa'i and others, publicly condemned Iran's role and warned of the sectarian consequences. Even some Alawite and Christian voices expressed concern over Iran's growing control and the destabilization it caused.[14]

VII. After Assad's Fall – Iran in Retreat

The collapse of the Assad regime in late 2024 dealt a strategic blow to Tehran. Iran lost its strongest foothold in the Levant, and its militias began to retreat into isolated pockets, coming under attack from a resurgent Syrian resistance.

The new transitional Syrian government has initiated legal and political efforts to dismantle Iranian influence, prosecute war crimes, and expel foreign militias. The Iranian project in Syria, once touted as a cornerstone of the Axis of Resistance, is now facing existential collapse.[15]

Iran's involvement in Syria has been among the most destructive foreign interventions in the country's modern history. It transformed a domestic revolution into a regional sectarian conflict, devastated the country's demographic and social landscape, and entrenched foreign occupation.

As Syrians look to rebuild, the task of uprooting the Iranian legacy and restoring genuine national sovereignty is as urgent as any

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[13] International Crisis Group, "Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East," 2017.

[14] The Syrian Observer, "Religious Leaders Warn of Iranian Influence," 2024.

[15] CSIS, "The Collapse of the Axis of Resistance?", 2024.

reconstruction plan. The Syrian revolution did not only seek the fall of Assad, but the end of all systems of tyranny—whether domestic or imported.

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24

Iran's Sectarian Project in Syria: Objectives and Activities During the Revolution (2011–2024)

From the earliest days of the Syrian revolution in March 2011, Iran swiftly adopted a clear and unwavering position of support for Bashar al-Assad's regime. This alignment was not just a matter of geopolitical interest but the execution of a well-prepared and ideologically grounded regional project. At the core of Tehran's involvement was a comprehensive sectarian strategy designed to expand Iranian Shiite influence into the Levant through a combination of military, cultural, social, and demographic tools.[1] What began as a claim to support a besieged ally in the "Axis of Resistance" evolved into a deep and aggressive penetration into Syrian society—reshaping its religious, cultural, and even ethnic composition.

I. Ideological and Political Foundations of Iranian Influence

Iran views Syria as a linchpin in the so-called "Shiite Crescent," stretching from Tehran to Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut.[2] Its goal has been to consolidate this corridor as a strategic and ideological front against Sunni Arab influence, Western power, and Israeli proximity. Tehran has long understood that maintaining control over Syria—particularly the capital Damascus and its surrounding countryside—ensures access to Hezbollah in Lebanon, influence over Palestinian

[1] RAND Corporation, "Iran's Power Projection in the Levant," 2022.

[2] Washington Institute for Near East Policy, "Iranian Religious Soft Power in Syria," 2023.

resistance factions, and the capacity to pressure Israel from its northern front.

While Iran's public narrative focused on fighting "terrorism" and defending "holy sites," its actual operations were underpinned by a sectarian worldview inspired by the doctrine of *Wilayat al-Faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist). Iran's religious and security establishments considered the Syrian revolution not only a threat to a political ally but also an opportunity to expand Shiite influence into a historically Sunni-majority land. This strategy relied on creating loyalist militias, educational institutions, and demographic changes that would permanently embed Iranian ideology into Syria's fabric.

II. Ground Implementation: Phases of Sectarian Expansion

Phase One (2011–2013): Influence Under the Cover of Aid

At the height of the Syrian uprising's early humanitarian crisis, Iran established aid organizations and cultural centers in regime-held areas under names like the "Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation," "The Iranian Cultural Mission," and the "Islamic Charity Organization."[3] These centers provided conditional aid—food, housing, and medical care—in exchange for participation in Shiite religious programs or allegiance pledges to Iranian-affiliated figures.

In areas like Sayyidah Zaynab (Damascus), Zahra (Aleppo), and parts of Homs, Iran refurbished shrines and *husseiniyas* and began hosting lessons, film screenings, and religious gatherings centered around Shiite theology, the history of Karbala, and the glorification of Iranian martyrs. Children and youth were frequent targets, often recruited through games, storytelling, and small stipends.

Phase Two (2013–2017): Military Empowerment and Sectarian Mobilization

With the battlefield shifting, Iran deployed more direct tools of control. Hezbollah officially entered the war in 2013, tipping the balance

[3] Omran Center for Strategic Studies, "Iranian Influence in Syria: Maps and Institutions," 2021.

in battles like Qusayr and Qalamoun.[4] Iran also organized and funded the arrival of thousands of Shiite fighters from Iraq (e.g., Harakat al-Nujaba, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq), Afghanistan (Liwa Fatemiyoun), and Pakistan (Liwa Zainabiyoun).

More importantly, Iran began training Syrian nationals—some already loyal to the regime and others offered security and income—into militias like Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas, Liwa Imam al-Hussein, and the Syrian National Defense Forces. These groups were not only military units but also ideological institutions. Members were required to participate in Shiite rituals, wear badges bearing Ayatollah Khamenei's image, and memorize elements of Iranian revolutionary ideology.

Heavily sectarian neighborhoods emerged, such as Mazzeh 86 and Sayyidah Zaynab, where Syrian identity was gradually replaced with an imported Khomeinist identity through schools, banners, and exclusive religious infrastructure.

Phase Three (2017–2020): Naturalization and Institutional Penetration

As the military front stabilized in favor of the regime, Iran moved to institutionalize its influence. It pressured the Assad regime to grant Syrian citizenship to thousands of Shiite fighters and their families—particularly Afghans and Iraqis who had settled in areas vacated by forced displacement campaigns.[5]

Iran also penetrated religious institutions and curriculum. Damascus seminaries and Islamic faculties received funding contingent on introducing comparative studies that emphasized Shiite jurisprudence and theology. Scholarships to Qom and Najaf proliferated among Syrian youth, while new Arabic-language media (TV channels, websites, social platforms) pushed a sectarian message disguised as anti-imperialism and Islamic unity.

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[4] Anadolu Agency and Zaman al-Wasl, Reports on Shiite Militias in Syria.

[5] SNHR, Reports on Sectarian Violations and Naturalization Policies.

Phase Four (2020–2024): Residential Expansion and Demographic Engineering

Amid severe economic collapse and the mass flight of Syrians from their homes, Iranian-backed entities and Shiite businessmen—many Lebanese or Iraqi—purchased properties en masse in Old Damascus, Homs, Zabadani, Deir ez-Zor, and Darayya.[6] These acquisitions were often made through coercion or exploitative pricing and followed military campaigns that had emptied these areas of their native Sunni populations.

These homes were then allocated to Shiite families—some Syrian converts, but many foreigners given citizenship or residency through regime decrees. In these areas, Iran launched an intensive campaign to reconstruct *husseiniyas*, introduce Shiite religious holidays into the public sphere (especially Ashura and Arbaʿeen), and plant ideological centers disguised as community halls or orphanages.

III. Objectives of Iran's Sectarian Project in Syria

Iran's sectarian enterprise was not haphazard—it had clear and deliberate goals:

1. **Prevent the Rise of a Sunni-Led or Democratically Aligned Syria**: A post-Assad Syria with Sunni governance or democratic legitimacy would challenge Iran's entire regional model.[7]
2. **Consolidate a Strategic Corridor from Tehran to Beirut**: Syria was not an end but a bridge to control Lebanon and threaten Israel's northern borders through Hezbollah.
3. **Engineer Demographic Realities Favorable to Iran**: By displacing Sunni populations and replacing them with Shiite communities, Tehran hoped to ensure a long-term loyalist base on Syrian soil.

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[6] Carter Center, "Demographic Engineering in Homs and Damascus," 2018.

[7] Al-Mesbar Studies and Research Center, "Soft Shi'ization in the Levant," 2019.

4. **Transform Damascus into a Symbol of Shiite Expansion**: The city, home to the Umayyad Mosque and legacy of Sunni power, was central to Iran's symbolic conquest, aimed at rewriting religious history and expanding its ideological geography.

IV. Popular Resistance to Sectarianization

Despite the heavy security apparatus, Syrians—especially in opposition-held or contested areas—organized subtle but powerful campaigns of resistance. Religious leaders, community elders, and youth activists warned about Iranian programs and countered them with mosque-based education, underground seminars, and community initiatives.

In many cases, families pulled their children from Iranian-funded programs after discovering their content. Prominent Syrian scholars such as Shaykh Usama al-Rifa'i, Shaykh Sariya al-Rifai, and Shaykh Muhammad al-Yaqoubi issued statements and sermons warning against ideological manipulation and called for safeguarding Syria's Islamic and national identity.[8]

Even within regime-loyal areas, resentment grew. Some Alawite and Christian communities feared being marginalized by the growing Iranian influence, while Ba'athist secularists objected to Tehran's domination of the military and religious space.

V. The Broader Implications

Iran's sectarian project in Syria has had catastrophic consequences—not only in terms of humanitarian cost but also in the unraveling of Syria's historically pluralistic identity. By injecting sectarian militias and ideologies into the heart of the Syrian crisis, Iran deepened fault lines that will take generations to repair. The long-term effects include:

- Entrenchment of sectarian enclaves
- Rise in anti-Iran sentiment across the Sunni Arab world

[8] Syria Direct and Al-Araby al-Jadeed, Interviews with Syrian Refugees.

- Radicalization of segments of the population in response to perceived religious colonization
- Legal and political challenges for post-war reconciliation and repatriation

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Russian Intervention in Syria

Russia's direct military intervention in Syria, launched in September 2015, marked a turning point in the Syrian conflict. Unlike Iran's sectarian and transnational involvement, Russia presented itself as the official protector of the Assad regime on the international stage—through its vetoes at the UN Security Council and relentless air campaigns on the ground.[1] This chapter explores the roots of Russia's involvement in Syria, including the historical relationship between Damascus and Moscow, the motivations and tactics behind Russian intervention, its alignment and friction with Iran, and the profound consequences of its military campaign on Syria's future.

I. Historical Background: Syria and Russia Before 2011

The relationship between Syria and the Soviet Union dates back to the early years of the Cold War. In the 1950s and 1960s, as Syria embraced pan-Arabism and anti-imperialism under the Ba'ath Party, it found a natural ally in Moscow. The Soviet Union became Syria's primary arms supplier and strategic patron, establishing military, economic, and intelligence cooperation.

When Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1970, ties with Moscow deepened further. The Soviet Union helped build Syria's military infrastructure, and by the 1980s, Syria had become one of the largest recipients of Soviet military aid outside the Warsaw Pact. The naval base in Tartus, established in the 1970s, symbolized the strategic value Syria held for Moscow as a Mediterranean outpost.[2]

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[1] Omran Center for Strategic Studies, *Russia's Role in the Syrian Conflict: From Intervention to Occupation*, 2020.

[2] See: Martin Chulov, "Russia's Moves in Syria have coalition Questioning Motives," *The Guardian*, September, 16, 2015.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, relations cooled, but never disappeared. By the early 2000s, under Vladimir Putin, Russia sought to reassert its influence in the Middle East. Syria's isolation after the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in 2005 opened a door for renewed Russian engagement, culminating in the 2005 debt forgiveness deal and arms contracts.[3] When the uprising erupted in 2011, Russia already had decades of entrenched relations with Damascus—making Syria a crucial test of Moscow's return to global prominence.

II. Motivations for Russian Intervention

Preserving a Strategic Ally: The survival of Bashar al-Assad's regime meant preserving Russia's longstanding foothold in the Middle East. Syria hosted Russia's only naval base on the Mediterranean (Tartus) and allowed for the establishment of the Hmeimim Airbase in Latakia.

Reasserting Global Influence: The Syrian war presented an opportunity for Putin to challenge Western dominance, particularly after the 2011 NATO-led intervention in Libya. By intervening in Syria, Russia reestablished itself as a global powerbroker.

Military Testing Ground and Arms Sales: The conflict served as a live-fire testing ground for advanced Russian weapons, including precision-guided munitions and air-defense systems. It also helped boost Russia's arms sales globally, with Syria used as a showroom for military hardware.

Combating Western Regime Change Doctrine: Russia viewed Western support for the Syrian opposition as part of a broader pattern of foreign-imposed regime change. The Kremlin was determined to block another Libya-style intervention and to uphold the norm of state sovereignty as it defines it.

[3] Carnegie Endowment, "Moscow's War in Syria: Goals, Costs, and Consequences," 2022.

III. Phases and Tactics of Russian Military Intervention

Beginning in 2015, Russia launched an intensive aerial campaign that complemented ground operations by the Syrian regime and Iranian-backed militias. Key features included:

Massive Aerial Bombardment: Russian airstrikes targeted opposition-held towns, often hitting hospitals, schools, markets, and civil defense centers.[4]

Sieges and Starvation Tactics: Russian forces assisted in surrounding rebel-held areas like Aleppo and Eastern Ghouta, enforcing brutal blockades.

Intelligence and Reconnaissance Support: Through drones and electronic warfare, Russia supplied real-time battlefield intelligence.

Facilitating Forced Displacement: Russia helped broker "reconciliation agreements" that often led to the forced expulsion of local populations.[5]

Use of Disinformation Campaigns: Russian state media and social media accounts launched global campaigns to distort facts, discredit opposition voices, and justify airstrikes under the pretext of combating terrorism.

IV. Russian War Crimes and Human Rights Violations

Numerous human rights organizations have documented Russia's role in atrocities, including:

Maaret al-Numan Market Massacre (2019): Over 40 civilians killed in an airstrike.[6]

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[4] Human Rights Watch, "Targeting Life in Syria: Russian Airstrikes on Civilians," 2019.

[5] United Nations Human Rights Council Reports, *A/HRC/46/55* and related briefings.

[6] Syrian Institute for Studies, "Russian War Crimes in Syria: Reports and Investigations," 2021.

Atareb Hospital Bombing (2016): Destruction of a hospital in western Aleppo.

Aleppo Offensive (2016): A months-long siege and bombardment campaign that killed hundreds and displaced thousands.

These deliberate attacks on civilian infrastructure were widely condemned as war crimes and violations of international humanitarian law.

V. Russia and Iran in Syria: Strategic Partners or Competitors?

Despite their shared support for Assad, Russia and Iran often had divergent goals:

Competing Spheres of Influence: Russia sought control over military strategy and state institutions, while Iran focused on embedding long-term ideological and militia networks.

Conflicting Economic Interests: Disputes arose over control of Syria's oil, gas, phosphate resources, and port access.

Tactical Coordination with Strategic Distrust: While cooperating on the battlefield, each sought to maximize its own leverage in postwar Syria.

By 2024, tensions between the two became more visible as both jockeyed for influence amid regime collapse.

VI. Public Perception of Russia in Syria

From the outset of its intervention, Russia was widely viewed by Syrians as an occupying force. Demonstrators across Syria chanted against Russian bombing and held Vladimir Putin personally responsible for countless civilian deaths. Efforts by Moscow to present itself as a peace broker or humanitarian force were overwhelmingly rejected by the Syrian public.

VII. Russia's Private Military Contractors and Shadow Forces

Beyond its formal military forces, Russia deployed private military contractors—most notably the Wagner Group—in Syria. These forces provided security for oil and gas fields, protected regime officials, and

participated in combat operations, often with fewer legal constraints and accountability. Wagner units were implicated in extrajudicial killings and human rights abuses, particularly in eastern Syria.[7] Their presence deepened Moscow's stake in Syria's resource networks and served as a tool for deniable military influence.

VIII. After Assad: The Decline of Russian Influence?

Bashar al-Assad's flight in December 2024 dealt a heavy blow to Russian ambitions. Though Russia retained a military presence in Tartus and Hmeimim, the collapse of the regime eroded Moscow's primary source of legitimacy and influence. The new transitional government began reviewing Russian agreements and faced widespread popular demands to expel all foreign troops, particularly those involved in past military campaigns against the Syrian people. This marked a turning point in Syria's relationship with Moscow, as long-suppressed anger over Russia's role in propping up a brutal regime came to the surface.

Compounding Russia's setbacks was its ongoing war in Ukraine. The prolonged conflict drained Moscow's military and economic capacity, leaving it overstretched and less able to project power abroad. Once seen as a decisive powerbroker in the Middle East, Russia now finds itself increasingly isolated in Syria, confronted by a hostile population and diminishing returns on its investment.

Russia's intervention in Syria was not merely a show of loyalty to a dying regime—it was a neo-imperial gamble aimed at reshaping the global order and cementing Moscow's influence. In the end, however, this gamble has left Russia entangled in a devastated country with a population that overwhelmingly views it as a destructive force. As Syria turns the page, Russia's role stands as a stark warning about the cost of foreign domination and unchecked military power.

[7] RAND Corporation, "The Wagner Group's Role in Syria and Beyond," 2023.

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Part VII

Crimes of the Nusayri (Alawite) Regime in Syria: From Historical Resentment to Systematic Violence

26

Since the Ba'ath Party's rise to power in the 1960s, the Alawite sect—historically known as the Nusayris—began ascending within Syria's political and military structure, leveraging their alliance with the military-Ba'athist complex. But with Hafez al-Assad's ascent to power in 1970, this covert sectarian infiltration evolved into a full-fledged project of Alawite domination over the Syrian state.[1] The regime systematically secured control of the military, intelligence services, and state institutions.

However, the outbreak of the Syrian Revolution in 2011 revealed a far darker reality: the entrenched ideological hostility and psychological conditioning of a sect groomed for decades to view Syria's Sunni majority with fear and hatred. This chapter traces the war crimes committed by the Alawite-dominated regime during the revolution, and provides a psychological and structural analysis of these crimes through a study of historical patterns and belief systems.

I. Historical Roots and Political Ascent

The Nusayris emerged as an esoteric sect in the 3rd century AH (9th century CE), often isolated and stigmatized for their secretive and heterodox beliefs. Marginalized for centuries, they found opportunity under the French Mandate, which granted them disproportionate access to the military. During the 1940s and 1950s, Nusayris steadily gained ground in the officer corps.

The rise of Hafez al-Assad marked the beginning of a sectarian empowerment project. Under his rule, Alawites were strategically placed at the helm of security branches and key state institutions. The 1982 Hama massacre, in which tens of thousands of Sunnis were killed, was a

[1] Abdurrahman al-Hajj, *Sectarianism and the State in Syria*, 2015.

blood-soaked signal of the sect's dominance and its willingness to use mass violence to suppress any threat to its rule.

II. War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity (2011–2024)

Between 2011 and 2024, the Syrian regime, with the direct involvement of Alawite-dominated militias and intelligence agencies, committed widespread war crimes and crimes against humanity. These crimes were not isolated incidents but rather systematic campaigns aimed at suppressing dissent, intimidating Sunni communities, and ensuring the regime's survival through terror.

Among the most horrifying episodes were a series of massacres carried out with deliberate brutality. The Houla massacre in 2012 marked an early turning point, where over 100 civilians—mostly children—were executed at close range by Alawite "Shabbiha" militias.[2] The following year, the Bayda massacre shocked observers as a Sunni village near Baniyas was razed, its residents slaughtered with knives in what resembled a medieval purge. Similar atrocities unfolded in Daraya, Tremseh, Qalaat al-Hosn, and Barzeh—each following a familiar and chilling pattern: regime forces would storm a Sunni-majority area, often after a brief siege or shelling, and then engage in door-to-door executions, mass killings, and arson. These operations revealed a calculated intent not only to crush opposition but to cleanse entire neighborhoods based on sectarian identity.

Alongside mass killings, the regime's detention and torture system reached levels that drew international comparisons to Nazi concentration camps. Syria's intelligence apparatus, dominated by Alawite officers, operated dozens of detention centers where torture was routine and industrial in scale. The most damning evidence emerged with the release of the "Caesar files"—tens of thousands of photographs smuggled out by a defector that documented the corpses of detainees who had been starved, beaten, mutilated, and ultimately killed.[3] Many of the bodies bore signs of electric burns, eye gouging, and broken limbs.

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[2] Human Rights Watch, "Crimes Against Humanity in Homs", 2012.

[3] Caesar Files Group, "Documenting the Atrocities," 2016.

These were not cases of rogue behavior but part of a nationwide system of repression run with bureaucratic precision.

Sexual violence was also weaponized as a tool of war and humiliation.[4] Numerous testimonies and reports confirmed the use of rape—of both men and women—in detention centers and during military raids. Survivors recounted horrific experiences of physical and psychological torture designed to break communities and assert dominance. Equally disturbing were the videos that surfaced showing regime-affiliated fighters dancing on corpses, mutilating bodies, and laughing as they filmed scenes of desecration. These acts revealed a ritualistic dimension of vengeance, where humiliation of the dead became a public spectacle of sectarian hatred and impunity.

Together, these crimes paint a picture of a regime that turned its machinery of state into an instrument of mass terror. The scale, severity, and systematic nature of these violations leave no doubt that war crimes and crimes against humanity were a central feature—not a byproduct—of the Assad regime's response to the Syrian revolution.

III. Sectarian Indoctrination and Institutional Control

The Assad regime systematically embedded sectarian ideology within the core of Syria's military and intelligence institutions. Military academies and intelligence schools were not merely centers of tactical instruction—they were tools of psychological and ideological conditioning.[5] Cadets and recruits were taught unwavering loyalty to the Assad family, and the conflict was framed not as a political crisis but as an existential war for the survival of the Alawite community. This indoctrination painted Sunnis broadly as a latent threat, legitimizing preemptive violence and reinforcing a siege mentality among Alawite officers. Defectors from military intelligence revealed that internal curricula focused on instilling fear, vengeance, and blind obedience, transforming ordinary recruits into agents of brutal repression. Beyond political loyalty, this framework was rooted in a deeper sectarian

[4] Amnesty International, "It Breaks the Human," 2016.

[5] Omran Center for Strategic Studies, "Alawite Militias and Local Power Structures in Syria," 2020.

cosmology. Concepts such as *taqiyya* (religious dissimulation) and esoteric beliefs in hidden messianic missions were invoked to rationalize deception and coercion, casting the regime's brutal policies as necessary measures for the preservation of the sect. The result was an apparatus of power in which sectarian fear and religious distortionglob merged to produce a culture of cruelty, secrecy, and unwavering loyalty to the regime's survival above all else.

IV. Psychological Analysis of Collective Behavior

The brutality witnessed during the Syrian conflict cannot be fully understood without examining the psychological undercurrents that shaped the behavior of regime loyalists, particularly within Alawite communities. Centuries of marginalization under Sunni-dominated rule had fostered a deeply ingrained persecution complex among many Alawites. This historical grievance, once weaponized by the Assad regime, morphed into a powerful ideology of vengeance. The uprising was framed not as a political movement, but as a Sunni conspiracy aimed at exterminating the Alawites—fueling a violent drive not only to preserve power but to exact historical retribution.

Within this mindset, the regime's survival became synonymous with the survival of the sect. The Nusayri doctrine, characterized by its esoteric beliefs and rejection of mainstream Islamic law, reinforced a culture of religious secrecy and insularity. Inside the community, particularly among the youth, the fall of the regime was taught to be equivalent to existential annihilation. Submission to the Assad leadership was portrayed as a religious and communal duty, while any resistance was demonized as a genocidal Sunni plot. This created an environment in which violence against perceived enemies was not just permitted—it was sanctified.

What emerged was a disturbing psychological profile often described as an "executioner complex." The systematic torture, desecration of bodies, and ritual humiliation documented throughout the conflict point to a form of collective sadism, where religious fervor, intergenerational trauma, and unchecked power converged. These actions were not merely the result of orders from above; they were manifestations of a deeper

psychosocial process. According to Social Identity Theory, the strong in-group cohesion around Alawite identity, combined with the dehumanization of the Sunni out-group, allowed for extreme aggression and moral disengagement.[6] Alawite fighters, shaped by years of indoctrination and fear-based narratives, carried out atrocities not only as soldiers but as agents of a communal psychodrama—one that played out through the mechanisms of a modern, totalitarian security state.

V. Broad-Based Complicity and Societal Silence

While some Alawites opposed the regime, the majority remained silent or complicit. Alawite businessmen, clerics, and academics provided moral and material support to the war effort. State media figures played a pivotal role in dehumanizing protestors, often portraying them as Wahhabi extremists to justify brutal repression.

This collective complicity resembled the Zionist model in Palestine, where violence is framed as defensive necessity, normalizing atrocities and precluding reconciliation without justice.

VI. Demographic Engineering and Strategic Displacement

Alawite militias were instrumental in forcibly displacing Sunni populations from major cities like Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, and Deir Ezzor. Properties were seized or repopulated with Alawites or allied Shia families under Iranian sponsorship.

This sectarian redrawing of Syria's demographic map was part of the regime's vision of a "Useful Syria," effectively partitioning the country into zones of loyalist control and religious cleansing.

VII. Justice and Transitional Accountability

The crimes committed by the Alawite-led regime during the Syrian revolution were not incidental acts of war but the result of a deeply embedded structure of ideological control and sectarian power. From the very foundations of the security state to its brutal suppression of dissent, the regime's actions reflected a system designed to protect a minority elite through repression, indoctrination, and violence. While the fall of

[6] Subhi Hadidi, *On New Sectarianism in Syria*, 2019.

the Assad regime in December 2024 marked the end of its formal grip on power, the path to national healing requires far more than a political transition. It demands a process of comprehensive transitional justice that addresses the root causes of sectarianism and institutional abuse.

Key to this process is the establishment of war crimes tribunals that hold accountable the known perpetrators within the military and intelligence services who orchestrated massacres, torture, and demographic engineering. Alongside this, Syria must implement truth commissions to uncover and document the full scale of the regime's sectarian violence, indoctrination programs, and institutionalized cruelty. Disarming and dismantling sectarian militias—especially those rooted in Alawite strongholds—is also essential, as their continued presence threatens any post-conflict reconciliation.

Equally important are civic reintegration programs aimed at Alawite youth who were raised under decades of regime propaganda and psychological conditioning. These initiatives should promote national identity over sectarian affiliation, encouraging inclusion, education, and dialogue to break cycles of inherited fear and hate. Only through a combination of justice, truth, and deep institutional reform can Syria begin to transcend the trauma of sectarian conflict and rebuild a nation founded on equal citizenship and shared dignity for all its people.

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Part VIII

Between the Hammer and the Anvil

27

The Battle for Syria's Truth: Media, Demonization, and Global Abandonment

The Syrian revolution erupted in 2011 as part of the broader wave of Arab uprisings demanding freedom, dignity, and social justice. But unlike in Tunisia or Egypt, Syria's peaceful protests were met with unparalleled violence and repression. What followed was not only a physical war but a war of narratives—one where information was forged, distorted, and weaponized to serve the interests of tyranny. The Assad regime's monopoly over domestic media, the complicity of regional allies, and the silence—or worse, the appeasement—of the international community enabled the systematic demonization of a people's uprising and the erosion of its moral standing on the world stage.[1]

In all major revolutions, the battle over perception is as decisive as the struggle on the ground. Media becomes a tool of legitimacy or erasure, capable of either amplifying the voice of the oppressed or burying it beneath layers of propaganda. From the very first weeks of the Syrian uprising, the regime mobilized its full media apparatus to recast the revolution as a foreign conspiracy. State-run television, Radio Damascus, and newspapers like *Tishreen*, *Al-Baath*, and *Al-Thawra* propagated a message that the protests were riots orchestrated by terrorists, Zionists, and Western intelligence agencies.[2] Footage of tortured detainees—some of them minors—was aired with forced confessions linking them to outside powers.[3] Meanwhile, the voices of

[1] Amnesty International, "Truth and Lies: Media Manipulation and Propaganda in the Syrian Conflict," 2016.

[2] BBC Arabic, "How the Image of the Syrian Revolution Was Distorted in the Media."

[3] Human Rights Watch, "A Wasted Decade: Human Rights in Syria during Bashar al-Assad's First Ten Years in Power," Human Rights Watch, July 2010,

the victims were silenced, their deaths unacknowledged, their names erased. In contrast, regime soldiers were lionized as martyrs defending "national unity" against chaos. Over time, this messaging adopted an increasingly sectarian tone, framing Assad's rule as the final bulwark of secularism against a Sunni extremist takeover—thereby stoking fear among minorities and solidifying their coerced loyalty.[4]

Beyond Syria's borders, a network of loyalist and aligned media outlets helped launder and amplify these narratives. Lebanese channels like Hezbollah's *Al-Manar* and the pro-regime *Al-Mayadeen* merged Assadist propaganda with sectarian dog whistles,[5] portraying the opposition as Wahhabi fanatics bent on exterminating minorities. Internationally, *RT (Russia Today)* and *Press TV (Iran)* focused almost exclusively on extremist elements among the rebels, deliberately ignoring the movement's civilian origins and peaceful demands.[6] The cumulative effect was devastating: to international audiences, the revolution ceased to appear as a struggle for freedom and instead became framed as a civil war between equally ruthless factions—one that justified Assad's brutal response as the lesser evil.[7]

In contrast, revolutionary media and grassroots activists made heroic efforts to document the truth—despite minimal resources and immense danger. Dozens of local news pages emerged in cities like Daraa, Homs, and Aleppo, run by anonymous volunteers who risked arrest, torture, or death for every video or report they published. Citizen journalists and photographers—many of them teenagers—became the revolution's eyes and voice, capturing the courage of the protesters and the cruelty of the

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https://www.hrw.org/report/2010/07/16/wasted-decade/human-rights-syria-during-bashar-al-assads-first-ten-years-power

[4] Carnegie Middle East Center, "Media and Sectarianism in the Arab Uprisings," 2017.

[5] Washington Institute for Near East Policy, "Hezbollah's Media War and the Role of Al-Manar in Syria," 2018.

[6] Atlantic Council, Digital Forensic Research Lab, "The Assad Regime's Disinformation Campaigns Online," 2019.

[7] Foreign Policy, "Obama's Red Line and the Chemical Weapons Crisis in Syria," 2018.

regime.[8] Some, like Rashid Abu Shawar and Mahmoud Abu Zaid, paid the ultimate price for their work.[9] Media platforms such as *Sham Network*, *Syria Mubasher*, *Orient TV*, *Zaman al-Wasl*, and the *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights* played a pivotal role in archiving massacres, documenting war crimes, and challenging the lies broadcast by the regime.[10] Yet despite their dedication, these efforts were chronically underfunded, internally fragmented, and often excluded from major international media circuits. In the face of the regime's well-financed disinformation machinery, the revolutionary narrative struggled to gain global traction.[11]

Compounding the challenge was the stunning silence and complicity of the international community. As entire neighborhoods were shelled and civilians gassed, world powers offered little more than expressions of "deep concern." Russia and China repeatedly vetoed UN Security Council resolutions, shielding Assad from accountability.[12] Despite President Obama's public warning in August 2012 that the use of chemical weapons in Syria would cross a "red line," the U.S. and its Western allies ultimately refrained from direct military intervention when that line was crossed. After the Assad regime launched a sarin gas attack in Eastern Ghouta in August 2013—killing more than 1,400 civilians—international outrage surged, but military strikes were suspended. Instead, the Obama administration opted for a Russian-brokered agreement under which Syria pledged to surrender its chemical arsenal, a move many critics saw as a retreat from previously declared red lines and a blow to U.S. credibility.[13]

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[8] Syria Untold, Independent Syrian Media Platforms and Their Challenges, 2020.
[9] Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), "Journalists Killed in Syria," https://cpj.org
[10] Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), Annual Reports (2011–2024), https://snhr.org
[11] Omran Center for Strategic Studies, "Narrative Warfare in the Syrian Conflict," 2020.
[12] United Nations Human Rights Council, "Reports of the Independent International Commission on Syria, 2012–2024."
[13] "Epic Failure of Our Age: How the West Failed Syria," *The Guardian*, 10 February 2018.

Planned punitive strikes were canceled, arms shipments to the opposition were restricted, and a narrative of realpolitik began to take hold: Assad, though brutal, was preferable to a potentially Islamist alternative. This shift in perception was fueled in part by the media disinformation campaign, which successfully conflated the revolution with jihadism in the minds of many Western policymakers.[14]

The consequences of this narrative collapse were profound. Humanitarian, political, and diplomatic support for liberated areas dwindled. The regime, emboldened by international paralysis, intensified its assaults with the backing of Iran and Russia. Revolutionary media figures were exiled, detained, or killed, weakening the opposition's ability to control its own story.[15] The world began to speak of Syria not as a revolution crushed, but as a "sectarian civil war"—a tragic mischaracterization that served to absolve the perpetrators and marginalize the victims.[16]

In the end, the battle for Syria was waged not only on its streets and in its skies, but also on television screens, in newspaper headlines, and across social media platforms. The regime's success in controlling the narrative—backed by powerful allies and met with global indifference—allowed it to wage war not just on bodies, but on truth itself. If the world is ever to truly understand what happened in Syria, it must begin by revisiting the media war that reshaped the revolution's image—and asking why so many voices were ignored, distorted, or silenced.[17]

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[14] Middle East Institute (MEI), *Propaganda, Sectarianism, and the Media Landscape in Syria*, 2021.

[15] Reporters Without Borders (RSF), *Syria: Deadliest Country in the World for Journalists*, https://rsf.org

[16] Human Rights Watch, *A Wasted Decade: Human Rights in Syria 2011–2021*, 2021.

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28

Siege and Forced Displacement in the Rebellious Cities

"We didn't die from bullets—we died slowly from hunger, from watching our children fade away while the world watched in silence."
— A survivor from Madaya, 2016

In the Assad regime's military playbook, siege warfare became more than a tactic—it became doctrine. It was not only designed to recapture rebellious territories but to punish them, humiliate them, and erase their revolutionary will. These sieges were also instruments of demographic and psychological warfare, designed to reshape Syria's population map and fracture the country's social fabric. From as early as 2012, the method was refined, scaled, and deployed across the most defiant Sunni-majority cities and towns. The regime, backed by Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, perfected what came to be known as "kneel or starve." Towns were encircled, aid was cut off, utilities were severed, and relentless bombardment rained down. Civilians were left to suffer in darkness and hunger, until surrender or displacement became the only escape.[1]

Homs, once called the "capital of the revolution," became the first laboratory for this strategy. Beginning in early 2012, the Baba Amr neighborhood and later the Old City were besieged. Residents lived in cellars, grinding animal feed into flour, burning furniture for heat, and collecting rainwater to survive.[2] Snipers lined the rooftops, and any movement could mean death. By 2014, entire districts were in ruins. The United Nations brokered an evacuation deal in May of that year, leading

[1] Amnesty International, "We Leave or We Die: Forced Displacement Under Syria's Reconciliation Agreements," 2017.
[2] Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), "Documenting the Siege of Homs, 2014–2016."

to the forced departure of thousands of fighters and civilians.[3] It marked the first documented case of forced displacement during the uprising—a dangerous precedent that would be repeated again and again.

A few kilometers from Damascus, Darayya stood as a symbol of civil resistance and nonviolent protest. Its civic organization and defiance made it a prime target. Besieged from 2012 to 2016, Darayya endured daily barrel bombings, starvation, and disease. Residents grew rooftop gardens and collected rainwater to survive, while medical care and education continued underground. When the town was finally emptied in August 2016, it had endured one of the longest sieges of the war.[4] Nearby Muadamiyyah suffered a similar fate—besieged, starved, and subjected to chemical attacks.[5] Both towns were emptied of their populations under forced surrender deals that stripped residents of their homes, their rights, and their dignity.

Eastern Ghouta, the fertile belt around the capital, endured perhaps the harshest siege in modern history. Blockaded from 2013 to 2018, the area was subjected to chemical weapons in August 2013, killing over 1,100 civilians in one night. Families subsisted on boiled leaves and animal feed. The cost of food skyrocketed—$200 for a kilogram of rice. Malnutrition and anemia became widespread, especially among children. In March 2018, a final Russian-led offensive reduced what was left of Eastern Ghouta to rubble, and over 100,000 residents were displaced to northern Syria.[6] One doctor from Douma recalled, "We buried our children without shrouds. We stopped naming the dead. There were too many."

The twin towns of Zabadani and Madaya, surrounded by Hezbollah and regime forces in 2015 and 2016, became international symbols of

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[3] United Nations Human Rights Council, "Sieges as a Weapon of War: Enforced Starvation in Eastern Ghouta," March 2018.

[4] Human Rights Watch, "Syria: No Let-Up in Siege Warfare," 2017.

[5] Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), "Medical Despair in Besieged Areas of Syria," 2016.

[6] UN OCHA and Siege Watch (PAX & The Syria Institute), "Final Report on Siege Warfare in Syria," March 2018.

starvation warfare. Images of skeletal children shocked the world. Desperate parents boiled grass and salt water to feed their children. The UN described conditions as "medieval."[7] These towns were later used as bargaining chips in the sectarian "Four Towns Agreement," which exchanged their trapped Sunni residents for the Shia populations of Kafriya and al-Fuʿa,[8] reinforcing the brutal sectarian logic driving the war.

In Aleppo, the siege reached apocalyptic proportions. From July to December 2016, Eastern Aleppo was severed from the world. Russian and regime planes bombed hospitals, schools, and bakeries, reducing entire neighborhoods to ash. Civilians lived underground, terrified and starving. In December, over 35,000 people were forcibly evacuated to Idlib in convoys of green buses under the watch of international monitors.[9] One resident remembered, "We kissed the walls before we left. We didn't know if we'd ever come back."

These were not random acts of cruelty. Siege and displacement served strategic goals: breaking the revolutionary will, avoiding costly urban battles, and forcibly depopulating opposition strongholds near key regime centers like Damascus, Homs, and Aleppo. These operations also facilitated sectarian engineering—pushing out Sunni populations and settling in more loyalist or Shia-aligned residents, often under the supervision of Iranian-backed militias.[10] The regime used these sieges to impose coerced "reconciliation deals," which offered surrender in exchange for basic survival, stripping residents of civil rights and political agency. Displaced populations, once driven from their homes, were used as pawns in future negotiations and humanitarian bargaining.

International reaction was largely limited to condemnations. The United Nations issued repeated statements against siege tactics and the

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[7] BBC Arabic and Al Jazeera Investigative Reports on Madaya, 2016.

[8] The Carter Center, "Demographic Engineering in Homs and Damascus," 2018.

[9] Amnesty International, "We Leave or We Die," 2017; also confirmed by multiple eyewitness interviews via Orient TV and Zaman al-Wasl.

[10] Atlantic Council, "The Assad Regime's Use of Forced Displacement as State Policy," 2019.

use of starvation as a weapon, but was powerless to stop them. Russia and China's vetoes at the UN Security Council provided Assad with impunity, while Western nations hesitated to intervene militarily, even after the use of chemical weapons. Iran, meanwhile, played an active role in supporting siege operations and organizing sectarian swaps. The world watched, issued statements of concern, and moved on.

The consequences were staggering. More than 12 million Syrians were displaced—internally and externally. Civil society in the besieged areas was dismantled. Entire towns were emptied and rewritten by force. Sectarian divisions were militarized and entrenched. A generation of children grew up surrounded by hunger, fear, and ruin. And perhaps worst of all, siege warfare was normalized—setting a dangerous precedent for future conflicts around the world.

Siege warfare became a defining feature of Syria's national trauma. It was not just about controlling land—it was about crushing hope, silencing dissent, and redrawing the country's identity by force. These were not isolated cases; they were chapters of a single, brutal strategy aimed at erasing the revolution, one neighborhood at a time.

"The siege didn't just starve our bodies—it tried to kill our memory, our identity, our future."
— A survivor from Eastern Ghouta

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29

Idlib's Resilience: The Last Bastion of the Revolution

"They drove us from our homes, but not from our principles. We fled to Idlib not because it was safe, but because it refused to surrender."
— Displaced teacher from Ghouta, 2019.

In the fractured geography of post-2011 Syria, Idlib emerged not only as a location but as a symbol—a battered, crowded, and defiant bastion that carried the last pulse of a revolution. No one could have imagined, at the start of the uprising, that this rural province on the Turkish border—once marginalized, poor, and overlooked—would become the final refuge of millions and the nerve center of Syria's last pocket of resistance.

Before the revolution, Idlib had little political weight. Though blessed with fertile soil and proximity to Türkiye, it suffered long neglect under Ba'athist rule. Its conservative population and relative distance from regime power centers made it a region of suspicion for Damascus. But when protests ignited across the country in 2011, Idlib was among the first to rise. From the town squares of Saraqib and Ma'arrat al-Nu'man to the streets of Kafranbel and Khan Shaykhun, the slogans of dignity and freedom rang out, defying state repression with remarkable tenacity.

As armed conflict spread, Idlib transformed from a protest front into a battlefield. Between 2012 and 2015, opposition forces gradually gained control of the countryside, culminating in the 2015 capture of Idlib city by Jaish al-Fath (Army of Conquest)—a coalition of Islamist and nationalist forces. This event marked a turning point: nearly the entire province slipped from Assad's grip, save for the regime-held Shia enclaves of Kafriya and al-Fu'a. But with liberation came a new burden.

Idlib became the forced sanctuary for waves of displaced Syrians from every corner of the country—Aleppo, Homs, Eastern Ghouta, Daraa, Darayya. By 2021, its population had swelled to over 3.5 million, with half of its residents displaced and many of them children.[1]

For the regime and its backers, Idlib's continued existence as a revolutionary zone posed both a political and symbolic threat. The area became the target of unrelenting bombardment. Hospitals, markets, schools, and refugee camps were struck in near-daily air raids, often by Russian warplanes. The massacre at Ma'arrat al-Nu'man market in July 2019, which killed more than 40 civilians in a matter of seconds, was just one in a long chain of atrocities.[2] Camps in Qah, Atmeh, and Bab al-Hawa were bombed with cluster and incendiary munitions, in open violation of international law. Photographs of lifeless children pulled from rubble made global headlines, but rarely moved world leaders to act.

The darkest moment came in early 2020, when Assad's forces, backed by Russia and Iran, launched a massive offensive into southern and eastern Idlib. Ma'arrat al-Nu'man and Saraqib fell. In just a few weeks, over one million civilians were displaced—the largest single wave of forced migration in the conflict's history. The Turkish border remained sealed. International intervention was absent. Families fled into olive groves, caves, and tents, braving winter cold and bombardment with little more than tarps and blankets. Just as Idlib's fall seemed imminent, Türkiye launched Operation Spring Shield in February 2020, halting the regime's advance. A fragile ceasefire was negotiated in March. Though violations continued through 2024, the assault was stopped.[3]

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[1] UN OCHA, "Humanitarian Needs Overview: Northwest Syria," 2021–2024; Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), *Population and Displacement Reports*, 2020–2023.

[2] Human Rights Watch, "Targeting Life in Idlib: Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure," August 2019.

[3] Amnesty International, "Death Everywhere: War Crimes in Northwestern Syria," May 2020; UN OCHA Reports on Idlib Ceasefire, 2020–2021.

Despite the devastation, Idlib did not collapse. Amidst the ruins, a form of civilian life persisted—stubborn, creative, and determined. Makeshift schools sprang up in tents to educate displaced children. Local councils and aid organizations distributed food, coordinated evacuations, and organized health campaigns. The White Helmets became global symbols of civilian heroism, pulling survivors from beneath rubble while risking death from "double-tap" strikes.[4] Media collectives documented atrocities, livestreamed protests, and offered the world a window into the suffering and steadfastness of Idlib's people. Women's organizations ran trauma support centers and training programs, defying both war and social conservatism. And every Friday, despite bombardment and repression, protest banners flew in public squares—bold slogans reminding the world, "We are still here."

Yet, Idlib's internal reality was not without contradictions. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the dominant armed faction in the province, consolidated power by 2019, clashing with rival groups like Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam. Though it formed a civilian façade through the so-called Salvation Government, HTS was often criticized for its authoritarian tendencies and ideological rigidity. Nonetheless, it tolerated—and sometimes cooperated with—civil society organizations, education networks, and independent media platforms, creating a tense balance between military dominance and civic space.[5] The relationship between HTS and the people of Idlib remained uneasy, fluctuating between pragmatic coexistence and quiet resentment.

Internationally, Idlib became a pawn in competing agendas. Türkiye viewed it as a vital buffer zone, necessary to contain both the regime and refugee flows. Russia considered it the final stronghold to eliminate before declaring military victory. Iran saw it as a Sunni outpost obstructing its Shi'a expansion from Tehran to Beirut. Western media often reduced Idlib to a "jihadist enclave," neglecting its vast civilian population and the complex layers of its political and humanitarian landscape. This reductionist narrative, spread across newsrooms and

[4] Syrian Civil Defense (White Helmets), *Field Reports and Archive*, 2020–2023.

[5] See Michael Young, "What Will Happen in Idlib, Where Millions of Syrian Civilians Are Penned In? Carnegie Center, July 11, 2019.

diplomatic corridors, helped justify continued bombing campaigns, portraying them as counterterrorism operations rather than assaults on vulnerable communities.[6]

But Idlib's importance extended beyond geopolitics. Culturally and symbolically, it became the soul of the revolution. The town of Kafranbel, known for its brilliant protest banners and biting satire, shamed world powers and mocked dictators with fearless creativity. Poets, artists, and photographers chronicled daily life, turning destruction into testimony. Independent journalists filmed life under siege, smuggling out stories the regime sought to erase. Through resistance in word and art, Idlib preserved the memory of what the revolution once was—and what it still aspired to be.

By the end of 2024, Idlib remained the largest region outside Assad's control. Bloodied by war, burdened by displacement, and constrained by internal conflict, it nevertheless stood firm. It was a city of ruins and of banners, of trauma and of defiance. It was not a utopia, but it was not defeated.

"Idlib is not a city. It is the memory of freedom, of sacrifice, of all that was dreamed and denied."

[6] Al Jazeera, *The Last Breath in Idlib*, 2020 (*Mā Khafī Aʿẓam* series); Al-Araby al-Jadeed and France24 Arabic reports, 2018–2022.

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Part IX

Clerics of the Regime: Assad's Weaponization of Religion

30

From the earliest years of Hafez al-Assad's rule, the Baʿathist regime understood that religious domination could not be achieved through open confrontation alone. Unlike other secular republics that sought to suppress religion outright, the Syrian regime adopted a more calculated strategy: co-optation, containment, and ultimately transformation of the religious establishment into a loyalist apparatus. Hafez al-Assad forged alliances with various religious figures—Sufi sheikhs, official Sunni scholars, mosque preachers, fatwa councils, and even female religious movements—transforming them into tools of political control and social pacification. These clerical networks became key in the regime's efforts to manufacture a facade of religious legitimacy while maintaining tight security control over all expressions of faith.[1]

In a symbolic yet foundational move, the Syrian constitution was amended to label the Nusayri (Alawite) Hafez al-Assad as a "Muslim" president, despite his sectarian background. This rebranding was made possible with the backing of Sunni-aligned clerics and Lebanese Shiʿa figures such as Musa al-Sadr, all in a bid to give the regime an "Islamic" face.[2] Alongside this, Assad Sr. directed state funds toward mosque construction in Alawite areas and facilitated the enrollment of regime-aligned religious students in the Shiʿa seminaries of Qom. Many of these students returned as certified scholars authorized to issue fatwas—some of them later holding posts in Syria's official religious institutions.[3] As dissenting Sunni scholars were sidelined, imprisoned, or forced into exile, the regime promoted figures such as Ahmad Hassoun, Muhammad Saʿid Ramadan al-Bouti, and Ahmad Kaftaro[4]—men whose influence

[1] Louay Safi, *Islam and the State in Contemporary Syria*.

[2] Abd al-Ghani ʿImad, *Clerics and the State in Syria*, 2022.

[3] Harmoon Center, *Religion and the State System in Syria*, 2020.

[4] To learn about the positions of the Kuftaro group regarding the Syrian revolution, see: Muhammad Khair Mousa, *"The Kuftaro Group: Positions on the*

stemmed less from scholarship than from unwavering loyalty to the regime.[5]

Under Bashar al-Assad, this clerical state structure expanded. A significant number of religious officials appearing alongside Assad were from the Alawite sect. Some had received direct training in Iran's seminaries, while others served as liaisons between Damascus and the religious institutions in Qom and Najaf.[6] Though rarely acknowledged publicly, this sectarian reshaping of Syria's religious landscape was central to Assad's survival strategy—particularly as the state began preparing to face a generation increasingly disillusioned with its rule.

The outbreak of the revolution in 2011 marked the full mobilization of this regime-crafted religious apparatus. What had long been a tool for implied legitimization became a direct weapon of ideological warfare. Religious institutions were deployed to undermine the revolution, delegitimize protesters, and sanctify the regime's violence. Friday sermons echoed official propaganda. Fatwas declared protest as religious sedition (*fitnah*). Clerics denounced calls for freedom as Western conspiracies or takfiri manipulation. Figures such as Ahmad Badr al-Din Hassoun warned of suicide bombings in Europe if Assad fell,[7] while al-Bouti described the revolution as "a foreign-engineered mutiny" and declared Bashar al-Assad "a protector of the ummah."[8] Abd al-Fattah al-Bazm urged patience and cautioned against rebellion, offering religious silence in the face of massacres.[9]

Parallel to this was the rise of the **Qubaysiyat**—a once-secretive religious women's movement that became a public face of state-

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Syrian Revolution", on Syria TV: https://www.syria.tv/114745. See the whole translated report in the Appendices, no. 1.

[5] Syrian Memory Project – Testimony of ʿUmar Hudhayfah.

[6] University of Jordan, MA thesis on Sufi movements in Syria, 2019.

[7] Reports by Amnesty International indicated that the regime's Mufti, Ahmad Hassoun, was described in documents as authorized to sign execution orders, including the weekly executions at Saydnaya Prison between 2011 and 2015, during which approximately 13,000 detainees were executed following Hassoun's approval. See: Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun – Wikipedia.

[8] *Al-Bouti and the Revolution*, digital publication, 2014.

[9] Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, reports on regime-aligned clerics, 2012–2016.

sanctioned religiosity. Founded by Munira al-Qubaysi in the 1960s, the group focused on Qur'an memorization and moral discipline, cloaked in a Sufi ethos. Over time, it forged a close alliance with the regime.[10] By the time of the revolution, Qubaysiyat members were active in mosques, universities, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs, promoting obedience, discouraging dissent, and portraying Assad as a "pious defender of moderation."[11] In urban centers like Damascus and Aleppo, the movement became instrumental in deflecting young women away from political activism under the guise of moral education.

Through these religious arms, the regime advanced a sectarian narrative that rebranded the revolution as a Wahhabi insurrection, a Zionist plot, or a threat to Syria's centuries-old coexistence. It portrayed Alawite rule as a necessary safeguard against Sunni extremism, thereby justifying the presence of Shiʿa militias, Iranian forces, and Hezbollah under the pretense of shrine protection. Clerics were woven into this propaganda machine, not merely as supporters but as scriptwriters of the regime's theological self-image.[12]

This deep entanglement of religion and repression had lasting consequences. For younger Syrians, trust in the religious establishment collapsed. State-aligned clerics were viewed less as scholars and more as collaborators in tyranny. Their silence—or worse, their justifications—in the face of torture, siege, and mass killing severed the traditional bond between faith and moral resistance. In response, a new religious consciousness began to emerge: one rooted in the values of justice, dignity, and popular sovereignty. Exiled and opposition-aligned scholars like Shaykh Sariyah al-Rifaʿi, ʿAdnan al-ʿArʿur, and Anas ʿAyrut gained renewed influence, calling for religious revival untethered from political oppression.[13]

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[10] Al Jazeera Documentary – "Al-Qubaysiyat: From Secrecy to the Public Sphere" (2016).

[11] Al-Modon reports on women's religious groups in Damascus.

[12] Chatham House, *Sectarianism and Power in Syria* (policy paper, 2020).

[13] Interviews with Shaykh Sariyah al-Rifaʿi – Syria TV, 2022.

The regime's exploitation of religious institutions extended beyond ideology—it penetrated the economic sphere as well. In 2018, Law No. 31 granted the Ministry of Awqaf authority to form investment companies and manage endowment properties under the banner of "charitable development."[14] In practice, these revenues were siphoned to fund security branches and pro-regime business interests, as documented by SNHR and the Violations Documentation Center.[15] Zakat, religious donations, and waqf assets were absorbed into the regime's economic machinery, betraying their original purpose and turning charity into a funding tool for repression.

Meanwhile, independent religious voices were methodically silenced. Between 2009 and 2012, dozens of private religious schools, Qur'an institutes, and Salafi study circles were shut down.[16] Imams were required to follow regime-dictated sermon themes, avoiding all political commentary or social critique. Religious discourse became hollowed—stripped of its ethical core, repurposed to legitimize power, and emptied of the spiritual energy that once inspired movements for justice.

What emerged was a "religion of obedience"—not to God, but to the state. Friday sermons praised the president. Martyrs were those who died for the homeland, not for truth. Resistance became heresy, and protest, a form of apostasy. This perversion of faith alienated generations of Syrians who had once looked to religion for moral clarity and hope.

Yet amid this darkness, a new vision began to form—among scholars, youth, women, and refugees who refused to see faith reduced to tyranny's servant. They imagined a future in which religious institutions would be rebuilt around justice, where mosques would again echo with truth, and where Islam's purpose—to uplift the oppressed and inspire mercy—could be reclaimed.

Understanding how the Assad regime systematically weaponized religion is essential for envisioning a post-authoritarian Syria. The revolution's spiritual dimension—though eclipsed by political

[14] Syrian People's Assembly – *Endowments Law No. 31*, Official Gazette, 2018.
[15] SNHR, *Report on the Exploitation of Endowments and Charities*, 2022.
[16] SNHR Reports – Closure of religious centers and Qur'an schools, 2009–2012.

violence—remains a powerful undercurrent in the struggle for liberation. Reclaiming Syria's faith institutions from decades of co-optation means more than purging figureheads. It requires a radical renewal of religious discourse, the revival of independent scholarship, and a return to the prophetic mission of standing with the oppressed. In the Syria of tomorrow, religion must not justify tyranny—it must help end it.

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Part X

Political and Civil Resistance

31

The Syrian National Council: Formation, Members, and Policies

In the tumultuous early months of Syria's 2011 uprising, a glaring void became evident: the revolution lacked a unified political voice that could represent it on the international stage. The protests, though powerful and widespread, were leaderless and decentralized. They had emerged organically from the streets of Daraa, Homs, and Damascus, led by anonymous youth, civil society actors, and ordinary citizens. This spontaneity, while inspiring, also made the revolution vulnerable to being dismissed by the regime as either foreign-orchestrated or dangerously chaotic. In response to this critical need, the Syrian National Council (SNC) emerged as the first serious attempt to create a political structure capable of embodying the hopes and demands of a burgeoning revolutionary movement.

The SNC was born out of months of consultations among Syrian dissidents, intellectuals, and activists scattered across the globe. By the summer of 2011, a series of meetings held in Istanbul, Paris, and Washington, D.C. brought together a diverse group of political actors: Islamists, secular liberals, Arab nationalists, Kurdish activists, independents, and veteran opposition figures. These efforts culminated in the formal declaration of the SNC's establishment in Istanbul on October 2, 2011. With an initial membership of around 230 individuals, the council aspired to reflect the pluralism of Syrian society while presenting a unified front against the Assad regime.[1]

The composition of the SNC was notably diverse. Among its most prominent factions was the Muslim Brotherhood, whose organizational

[1] "The Political Performance of the Syrian National Council and Its Internal Evaluation," Syrian Memory Archive.

capacity gave it considerable influence. Other blocs included the Damascus Declaration (a secular opposition platform that predated the revolution), representatives from Kurdish and Christian communities, tribal leaders, and members of revolutionary local councils. High-profile figures such as Burhan Ghalioun, George Sabra, Abdulbaset Sieda, Riad Seif, and Bassma Kodmani lent the council both intellectual gravitas and public visibility. Despite this diversity, the SNC often projected a mixed image—Islamic in tone, yet liberal in aspirations—which led to criticism from some leftist and Arab nationalist circles.[2]

From its inception, the SNC declared itself the legitimate representative of the Syrian people and committed to the goals of the revolution: freedom, dignity, and the end of authoritarian rule. It categorically rejected any dialogue with the Assad regime unless it centered on a negotiated departure of Bashar al-Assad. The council also advocated for the protection of civilians, the imposition of a no-fly zone, and the establishment of humanitarian corridors. These demands were later codified in the council's "National Vision for the Transitional Phase," which pledged to build a democratic, pluralistic civil state grounded in respect for human rights.[3]

The SNC's diplomatic outreach was swift. It established relations with regional and international actors, participated in the Friends of Syria conferences, and secured limited diplomatic recognition from countries such as France, Türkiye, Qatar, and Libya. Yet these diplomatic gains were not matched by tangible influence inside Syria. Most of the SNC's members were exiles, and its ability to coordinate with activists and fighters on the ground was severely hampered by the regime's crackdown and the council's own logistical shortcomings.

This disconnect between external leadership and internal dynamics became increasingly problematic. Many inside Syria viewed the SNC as out of touch, elitist, and ineffective. Protest banners in Homs and Idlib criticized the council's sluggish response to massacres, while opposition fighters lamented its inability to provide funding, weapons, or strategic

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[2] *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies – Reports on SNC performance.*

[3] Founding documents and objectives, preserved at www.syrianmemory.org.

guidance.[4] As the armed struggle intensified and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) gained prominence, the SNC found itself sidelined by more localized and militarized forms of resistance.

The council's inability to build a coherent relationship with armed factions further weakened its position. Efforts to establish a joint military council floundered amid ideological rifts and competition for influence. Without a clear command structure or operational authority, the SNC was unable to act as a true political-military leadership. Meanwhile, internal divisions—between Islamists and secularists, Kurds and Arabs, exiles and locals—continued to erode cohesion. Leadership transitions, such as the successive presidencies of Burhan Ghalioun, Abdulbaset Sieda, and George Sabra, often mirrored these tensions, with resignations and public spats exposing deeper structural flaws.

Despite its vocal appeals for civilian protection, the SNC remained hesitant to openly call for international military intervention. Some interpreted this caution as strategic restraint; others saw it as weakness or fear of repeating the mistakes of Iraq and Libya. This ambiguity, however, left many Syrians disillusioned, particularly in the wake of atrocities like the Houla and Darayya massacres, when no decisive international response followed.

By the end of 2012, the Syrian National Council's influence had waned significantly. Though it had been recognized by some states as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people, it had failed to translate this recognition into concrete support for the revolution. In November of that year, under pressure from Western and regional powers, the SNC was subsumed into a broader umbrella group—the Syrian National Coalition for Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.[5] While some SNC members retained leadership roles within the coalition, the council itself became a symbolic rather than central actor.

Looking back, the Syrian National Council represents both an earnest attempt and a cautionary tale. It was the revolution's first

[4] Interviews with Burhan Ghalioun and Bassma Kodmani – Al Jazeera and Al-Araby Al-Jadeed.

[5] Carnegie Middle East Center – "The Syrian National Council: What's Next?"

institutional experiment—a body formed in exile, tasked with speaking for a people under siege. Its rise and decline offer critical lessons: political representation must be rooted in grassroots legitimacy; unity requires compromise and power-sharing; and external recognition is meaningless without internal effectiveness. Although it ultimately faltered, the SNC helped preserve the revolution's political memory, and its formation remains a landmark in the broader story of Syrian resistance.

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The Syrian National Coalition: Formation and Political Trajectory

By late 2012, Syria's opposition found itself trapped between growing militarization on the ground and waning political effectiveness abroad. The Syrian National Council (SNC), initially established as the revolutionary voice abroad, had lost credibility among Syrians and international actors alike. Its inability to unify the opposition, manage liberated areas, or gain recognition from key global powers left a void in representation. As the humanitarian crisis deepened and the conflict drew in regional and international players, there was mounting pressure to construct a more inclusive and credible political body. That pressure culminated in the formation of the Syrian National Coalition for Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, formally launched in Doha, Qatar, on November 11, 2012.[1]

The Coalition was not purely a Syrian initiative; it emerged amid intense diplomatic maneuvering. Backed heavily by the United States, France, Türkiye, and Qatar, the new body was designed to appear broader and more representative than the SNC. International stakeholders sought a platform capable of engaging with the United Nations, coordinating with armed factions, and preparing the groundwork for a post-Assad transition.[2] The Coalition's founding structure included roughly 63 members, drawing from:

- The Syrian National Council (which later merged into it),

[1] Al Jazeera English, *Syria's Opposition in Exile: Legitimacy and Limitations*, March 2014.

[2] Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, *Inside the Opposition: The Dynamics of the Syrian National Coalition*, 2013.

- Independent revolutionary activists from inside Syria,
- Tribal and civil society figures,
- Political and military defectors,
- Kurdish and Christian representatives,
- Local council members and Free Syrian Army (FSA) affiliates.

Its first president, Ahmed Moaz al-Khatib, a moderate religious scholar and former imam of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, brought symbolic and moral weight. His appointment was welcomed by many Syrians, including non-Islamist factions, and by international actors who saw him as a unifying figure. Al-Khatib's early speeches emphasized reconciliation, dignity, and the need to preserve Syria's pluralistic identity—a stark contrast to the rhetoric of hardline groups rising on the battlefield.[3]

From the outset, the Coalition declared itself the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people, committed to toppling the Assad regime and building a democratic, pluralistic state that guaranteed equal rights for all citizens. Its stated goals included uniting opposition ranks, gaining international recognition, managing governance in liberated areas, and preparing for eventual UN-sponsored negotiations.

In March 2013, the Coalition announced the formation of the Syrian Interim Government—an ambitious move to provide administrative services in opposition-held areas. Ministerial portfolios were assigned in health, education, justice, and defense. Yet this structure proved mostly symbolic. With little funding, no control over armed factions, and limited presence on the ground, the Interim Government lacked both credibility and functionality.[4] This failure was most evident during crises like the 2014 polio outbreak in eastern Syria and post-chemical attacks in

[3] Elizabeth Tsurkov, *The Syrian National Coalition: Powerless and Out of Touch*, Atlantic Council, 2014.

[4] Syria Direct, *Field Reports on Coalition Coordination Failures in Liberated Areas*, 2016–2020.

Ghouta, when the Coalition was unable to coordinate or deliver aid at scale.

Tensions within the Coalition surfaced early. Ideological rifts—particularly between Islamists and secular-nationalists—stymied collective decision-making. The Muslim Brotherhood was often accused of overreach and disproportionate influence, alienating key factions. Leadership turnover became frequent and destabilizing. Al-Khatib resigned in 2013, citing excessive foreign pressure and internal fragmentation. His successors—George Sabra, Hadi al-Bahra, Anas al-Abdah, Nasser al-Hariri—each faced criticism for ineffectiveness or foreign dependency. This revolving door of leadership made strategic coherence difficult.[5]

Compounding these internal fractures was the Coalition's increasing dependency on foreign powers. While financial and logistical support from Türkiye, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia sustained the Coalition's operations in exile (mainly Istanbul), it also exposed the body to allegations of foreign puppeteering. Major decisions—including cabinet appointments and diplomatic stances—were often delayed or dictated by external sponsors. This dependency further eroded domestic credibility, especially among grassroots activists and military factions inside Syria.[6]

Still, the Coalition scored several symbolic victories. By 2013, over 130 countries had recognized it as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. It was briefly granted Syria's seat in the Arab League and represented the revolution in Geneva II negotiations. However, such milestones proved largely ceremonial. On the ground, opposition-held areas were increasingly dominated by local factions, warlords, and Islamist groups who neither recognized the Coalition nor coordinated with it.

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[5] International Crisis Group, *Rigged Reform: Syria's Failed Political Transition*, 2015.
[6] Carnegie Middle East Center, *Syria's Exiled Opposition: Political Leadership or Empty Shell?*, 2016.

The rise of extremist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS between 2013 and 2015 severely weakened the Coalition's position.[7] Western backers grew wary of deeper engagement. Meanwhile, factions like Ahrar al-Sham or later Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) began asserting autonomous governance in Idlib and elsewhere. The Coalition, despite forming a Local Councils Unit, remained unable to bridge the gap between exile politics and frontline realities. Many activists viewed it as elitist, out-of-touch, and irrelevant.

A notable moment came in March 2013, when the Coalition was granted Syria's seat at the Arab League Summit in Doha. Yet by the 2014 summit, this symbolic gesture had been revoked, with the seat left vacant. The reversal illustrated both the fragility of the Coalition's gains and the shifting political calculations of Arab states.

From 2016 onward, the Coalition faced further marginalization. Russia's military intervention, Iran's growing entrenchment, and shifting U.S. policy under the Obama and Trump administrations all combined to alter the balance of power. U.S. disengagement and prioritization of counterterrorism left the Coalition sidelined. Efforts by the **Syrian Negotiation Commission (SNC)** and UN special envoys to include it in peace talks often appeared performative. By 2019, even in formerly loyal areas like northern Aleppo and rural Idlib, civil bodies began bypassing the Coalition in favor of local councils, Turkish-sponsored governance, or HTS-linked structures.[8]

Despite some attempts at institutional reform, the Coalition continued to operate in exile—symbolically holding conferences, issuing statements, and managing a skeleton Interim Government. It remained diplomatically active, but functionally detached from both the battlefield and the broader Syrian population. Its political influence narrowed to a handful of donor meetings, international conferences, and occasional representation at UN forums.

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[7] Aron Lund, *Divided They Stand: An Overview of Syria's Political Opposition Factions*, Carnegie Endowment, 2012–2016.

[8] Omran Center, *Interviews with Local Council Members in Idlib and Aleppo*, 2017.

What began in 2012 as a potential transitional leadership evolved into a political relic—a reminder of early hopes and persistent failures. For many Syrians, especially youth and displaced civilians, the Coalition failed to embody the revolution's promise of justice, dignity, and sovereign independence.

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Failures of the Syrian National Council and the Syrian Coalition – An Analytical Assessment

Despite the initially hopeful establishment of both the Syrian National Council (SNC) and its successor, the Syrian National Coalition for Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, both entities failed to fulfill the revolutionary aspirations of the Syrian people. They were established as representative political bodies of the revolution, meant to unify opposition efforts and engage the international community. However, their performance—particularly in terms of legitimacy, internal coherence, and strategic vision—fell far short of expectations.

Over the years, the distance between these exiled political bodies and the domestic revolutionary actors—both civilian and armed—grew increasingly pronounced. Many Syrians came to see them not as instruments of liberation, but as obstacles weighed down by fragmentation, external influence, and political ineffectiveness.

This chapter provides a critical analytical reading of the principal political and organizational failures of both bodies, placing them within the wider historical and geopolitical context, while identifying responsibilities without recourse to oversimplified blame.

1. Disconnection from the Syrian Interior

Arguably the most damaging failure was the lack of authentic, organic representation of Syrians living under bombardment, siege, and displacement. Both the SNC and the Coalition were largely composed of long-time exiles, many of whom lacked functional networks or operational presence within Syria. This structural gap hindered their

ability to formulate strategies informed by the needs of civilians and revolutionaries on the ground.

Although local coordination committees and civil councils were occasionally invited to participate, their roles remained largely symbolic. Decision-making stayed centralized among political elites with little knowledge of local governance or military dynamics inside Syria.

This detachment resulted in deep frustration. Interviews with local leaders and rebel commanders consistently revealed resentment toward a remote political leadership that was unable—or unwilling—to respond to urgent needs such as humanitarian relief, civil governance, and military coordination.[1]

Moreover, the slow and bureaucratic nature of their operations rendered them ineffective amid the fast-paced transformations of the battlefield and public opinion. Revolutionary councils, such as those in Aleppo, Homs, and Idlib, operated with little more than symbolic guidance or recognition from the political leadership in exile .

2. Internal Disputes and Institutional Instability

From their inception, both the SNC and the Coalition were marred by internal rivalries, political maneuvering, and power struggles exacerbated by external sponsorship. Rotating leaderships, short-lived presidencies, and factional appointments created an atmosphere of instability and lack of strategic direction. Rather than projecting unity, these frequent reshuffles exposed the movements' internal fragility.[2]

The SNC alone saw multiple leadership changes within its first two years, with each leader facing challenges of legitimacy and internal dissent. For example, Burhan Ghalioun's resignation in 2012 was precipitated by accusations of autocratic behavior and excessive Turkish

[1] The Syrian Observer. "The Opposition and the Disconnect from Revolutionary Reality," 2018.

[2] Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. "The Coalition's Internal Crisis: Regional Influence and Political Paralysis," 2020.

influence.[3] Later, the Coalition under figures such as Ahmed Moaz al-Khatib and Hadi al-Bahra faced similar crises of coherence, often during critical junctures in the war or peace talks.

The influence of regional backers (e.g., Qatar, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, UAE) often dictated appointments and policy priorities, effectively turning the opposition into a battleground for regional competition rather than national consensus.[4] These dynamics alienated independent figures and prevented the emergence of a unified leadership capable of presenting a credible alternative to the regime.

3. Absence of a Coherent National Project

While both the SNC and the Coalition frequently spoke of democracy, pluralism, and citizenship, they failed to articulate a detailed national vision that addressed Syria's complex post-conflict realities. Key sectors—such as education, reconstruction, transitional justice, and security sector reform—were left largely unaddressed in official documents.

Instead of formulating bottom-up political programs reflecting the needs of local communities, opposition leaders often waited for international initiatives and donor instructions before acting.[5] This made them appear passive and reactive, contributing to a perception of political dependency.

Furthermore, their failure to offer a compelling national narrative allowed space for extremist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS to gain traction in liberated areas. These groups presented themselves as more effective in providing governance and services—even if brutally so—than the distant and disorganized political leadership.

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[3] Deutsche Welle. "Burhan Ghalioun Resigns amid Growing Rift in Syrian National Council," 2012.

[4] Carnegie Middle East Center. "Foreign Influence and the Fragmentation of the Syrian Opposition," 2021.

[5] Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. "The Syrian Coalition: Missed Opportunities," 2019.

Opposition-affiliated media also failed to unify public messaging or counter the regime's portrayal of the opposition as chaotic and extremist. Public diplomacy campaigns remained disjointed and often contradictory, undermining international support and diminishing internal morale.

4. Squandered Political and Military Opportunities

Between 2012 and 2015, large parts of Syria—especially in the north and east—were under opposition control. During this period, the SNC and later the Coalition enjoyed substantial diplomatic support, including formal recognition by over 100 countries and a seat in the Arab League. Yet these gains were not translated into long-term strategic advantage.

Rather than investing in the development of local governance structures, judicial institutions, or public service delivery, opposition leaders remained embroiled in political disputes or donor-driven short-term projects. In places like Aleppo and Eastern Ghouta, local councils and civil defense units operated with little coordination or backing from the political opposition.[6]

This failure to consolidate governance contributed to fragmentation on the ground and gave extremist actors and foreign powers further leverage . The window for building a revolutionary governance model—particularly in 2013–2014—was missed, largely due to lack of planning, vision, and institutional support.

5. Foreign Dependency and Erosion of Autonomy

Perhaps the most controversial issue remains the degree of dependency on external sponsors. The SNC was widely seen as an extension of Turkish-Qatari preferences, while the Coalition, especially in its later phases, sought validation from Western and Gulf states.

This dependency bred cynicism among Syrians, who increasingly viewed the official opposition as beholden to foreign agendas. Decisions

[6] Ziadeh, Radwan. *The Syrian Uprising: Policy Failures and Lost Horizons*, 2017.

on appointments, strategies, and even negotiation platforms were often aligned with sponsor interests rather than revolutionary needs.[7]

While the regime's accusations of treason were propaganda-laden, the failure of the opposition to maintain strategic independence lent some credibility to these claims in the eyes of the public.

Donor priorities also shifted frequently, undermining long-term institution-building. Many funded projects were short-term and visibility-oriented, focused more on quick wins than systemic reform. As U.S. and European engagement decreased after 2013—particularly following the failure to act after the Ghouta chemical attacks—the opposition found itself politically exposed and structurally unprepared to adapt.[8]

The SNC and the Syrian Coalition were created to provide the Syrian revolution with political representation and diplomatic leverage. Yet due to structural disconnection, internal fragmentation, lack of a national vision, squandered opportunities, and overreliance on foreign powers, they ultimately failed to play a transformative role. Instead of guiding the revolution toward victory and governance, they became cautionary tales of how externalized, fragmented, and reactive opposition movements can be rendered ineffective—even when buoyed by genuine popular struggle.

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[7] Arab Center. "Donor Politics and the Hollowing of the Syrian Opposition," 2022.

[8] Ziadeh, Radwan. *Power and Resistance in Syria: From the Uprising to Fragmentation*, 2020.

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The Syrian Diaspora and the Revolution: A Pillar Beyond Borders

From the earliest days of the Syrian revolution in spring 2011, the revolutionary fervor was not confined to the country's borders. It reverberated across a vast global diaspora of Syrians—many of whom had long endured political exile, while others had left seeking economic opportunity. This transnational community swiftly transformed into a powerful extension of the uprising, offering intellectual, legal, financial, and media support. Despite internal divisions and challenges, their collective mobilization represented a formidable pillar of the revolutionary cause and remains one of its most enduring legacies.

Historical Roots of Exiled Political Activism

The mobilization of Syrians abroad during the revolution was not a spontaneous development, but the culmination of decades of activism. Since the early 1980s—particularly after the Hama massacre of 1982—waves of opposition figures were forced into exile following the brutal crackdown by Hafez al-Assad's regime. These exiles established rights organizations, independent publications, and opposition platforms across Europe, North America, and the Arab world.

Prominent among them were intellectuals like Radwan Ziadeh, human rights lawyers such as Haitham al-Maleh, and political dissidents linked to the *Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change* (2005), which united secular, Islamist, and leftist forces against the regime's authoritarianism.[1] These pre-2011 efforts laid the organizational and

[1] See Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), pp. 25–30.

ideological groundwork for broader mobilization when the revolution erupted.

Once protests broke out in Syria, diaspora networks activated swiftly. Demonstrations erupted outside Syrian embassies in dozens of capitals. These networks played foundational roles in forming early opposition structures, including the Syrian National Council (SNC) and the Syrian National Coalition. Diaspora figures such as Burhan Ghalioun, Basma Kodmani, Riad Seif, and Moaz al-Khatib assumed leadership roles, representing the revolution in international forums and media platforms.[2]

Media and Narrative Advocacy

In the face of the regime's monopolization of state media and its portrayal of the revolution as a foreign-backed extremist conspiracy, Syrian exiles filled a critical vacuum in information warfare. Diaspora actors launched independent media outlets such as:

- **Orient News** (based in Dubai)
- **Syria TV** (Istanbul)
- **Rozana Radio** (Paris)
- **Al-Modon** and **Al-Araby Al-Jadeed** (London and Doha)

These platforms documented regime atrocities, platformed dissident voices, and connected the diaspora with events unfolding in real time inside Syria.[3] They also countered disinformation and coordinated media campaigns that reached global audiences.

Additionally, diaspora activists built relationships with international journalists, curated exhibitions such as the *Caesar Photos*—which documented the torture of detainees in regime prisons—and supported

[2] Arab Reform Initiative, "The Syrian Diaspora's Role in the Uprising," 2019.

[3] *The Syrian Observer*, "Media in Exile: Syrian Independent Journalism in the Diaspora," 2020.

films like *For Sama* and *The Cave*, both of which received Oscar nominations and widespread acclaim.[4]

Legal and Human Rights Advocacy

One of the most significant achievements of the Syrian diaspora has been in the realm of legal accountability. Through collaboration with European legal institutions and the invocation of *universal jurisdiction*, Syrian human rights groups helped initiate groundbreaking war crimes prosecutions against former regime officials.

Notable among these was the Anwar Raslan trial in Koblenz, Germany, which culminated in a life sentence in 2022 for crimes against humanity.[5] This and other cases (such as that of Eyad al-Gharib) were made possible through extensive documentation and witness testimony collected by diaspora-led organizations including:

- The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM)
- Caesar Files Group
- The European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR) .

These efforts demonstrated that justice could be pursued even in the absence of international criminal court mechanisms—especially with Russia and China blocking referrals via the UN Security Council.

Humanitarian Relief and Development Work

Syrian diaspora communities also led large-scale humanitarian operations. Their familiarity with the cultural and political context inside Syria allowed for more effective and agile responses than many traditional international NGOs.

Organizations such as:

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[4] Oscar.org, "Academy Awards: For Sama, The Cave, Last Men in Aleppo," Academy Awards Database.

[5] Amnesty International, *Justice in Europe: Syrian War Crimes Trials Under Universal Jurisdiction*, 2021.

- SAMS (Syrian American Medical Society)
- Karam Foundation
- Shafak Organization
- Mercy Without Limits

provided critical health services, trauma care, food distribution, education, and psychosocial support. These NGOs operated across borders and worked closely with local councils, hospitals, and civil society initiatives in opposition-controlled areas.[6]

Their interventions often filled the gaps left by larger UN agencies, which faced regime obstruction or limitations on cross-border access. Particularly in northern Syria, diaspora-led aid groups became lifelines for millions.

Political Lobbying and Diplomacy

Syrian diaspora networks engaged in sustained lobbying of Western governments, parliaments, and international organizations. In the United States, groups like the:

- Syrian American Council (SAC)
- Syrian Emergency Task Force (SETF)
- Americans for a Free Syria

held hearings in Congress, briefed policymakers, and advocated for sanctions, humanitarian corridors, and recognition of opposition bodies. These efforts helped secure early diplomatic victories such as the Arab League suspension of Syria's regime membership in 2011 and recognition of the Syrian National Coalition as the legitimate representative of the people.[7]

In Europe, activists lobbied the EU Parliament, human rights councils, and national legislatures to document regime crimes and advocate for civilian protection.

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[6] SAMS Annual Reports 2013–2023; Karam Foundation Impact Reports.
[7] U.S. House of Representatives, Hearings on Syria, 2013–2017; SETF Advocacy Briefings.

Cultural Resistance and Artistic Expression

Cultural resistance emerged as a powerful instrument for maintaining revolutionary memory and confronting authoritarian narratives. Exiled Syrian artists, writers, musicians, and filmmakers contributed to a global body of work that humanized the conflict and conveyed its moral urgency.

Films such as:

- *For Sama* (Waad Al-Kateab)
- *Last Men in Aleppo* (Feras Fayyad)
- *The Cave* (Feras Fayyad)
- *Silvered Water* (Ossama Mohammed)

won international awards and provided haunting portrayals of life under siege, especially in Aleppo and Ghouta.[8]

Art exhibitions, literature, and music festivals in Berlin, Paris, London, and Istanbul created platforms for displaced Syrian voices, bridging the gap between politics and humanity.

Challenges and Internal Divisions

Despite their many contributions, diaspora activism was not immune to the same pitfalls that affected internal opposition forces. Rivalries over leadership, donor funding, and representation led to fragmentation across both political and civil society platforms.

Some opposition bodies based abroad became arenas for regional competition—reflecting the interests of their host states more than unified revolutionary goals. Ideological rifts between Islamists, secularists, and nationalists remained unresolved and often erupted into public disputes.[9]

Moreover, the disconnect between diaspora elites and grassroots activists inside Syria bred mutual distrust. Critics accused exiles of being detached, elitist, or opportunistic—using the revolution as a vehicle for

[8] Al Jazeera, "Cultural Resistance and the Syrian Diaspora," 2020.

[9] Arab Reform Initiative, "Potential and Pitfalls of Diaspora Activism," 2019.

personal advancement rather than national liberation. These tensions hindered the emergence of a cohesive, transnational leadership.

Nevertheless, the Syrian diaspora remains a vital actor in the revolutionary movement. Their ability to amplify the voices of the oppressed, document crimes, lobby international institutions, and deliver life-saving aid has kept the Syrian cause alive on the global stage. In the face of abandonment by many governments and institutions, diaspora activism has ensured that the memory of the Syrian revolution—and its demands for dignity and justice—remains a living force.

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Revolutionary Media and Human Rights Initiative: From the Streets to the Courtrooms

From the first moment Syrians chanted "Freedom" in the spring of 2011, the Assad regime understood that controlling the narrative was as crucial as controlling the streets. It deployed its full arsenal—censorship, propaganda, and surveillance—to suppress the truth and impose its security-centered narrative. In response, a new wave of grassroots media emerged, led by young Syrians who wielded smartphones instead of microphones, cameras instead of rifles. Their belief was clear: a single honest image could shake global conscience in ways that weapons could not.

Civilian activists became the primary witnesses of the revolution. In a media landscape where independent journalism was nonexistent, ordinary Syrians assumed the role of documentarians. They filmed protests, arrests, and brutal crackdowns using rudimentary equipment, uploading unfiltered footage to social media. The rawness of the images, often accompanied by chants and slogans behind the camera, conveyed an authenticity that garnered immense trust. Figures like Ghiath Matar from Darayya—known for offering flowers to soldiers—and lawyer-activist Razan Zaitouneh, who meticulously documented violations, became powerful symbols of this media uprising. As noted by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in *Media of the Syrian Revolution: Narratives of Pain and Heroism*, these efforts laid the foundation for an unprecedented citizen journalism movement in the Arab world.[1]

[1] Friedrich Ebert Foundation, *Media of the Syrian Revolution: Narratives of Pain and Heroism*, 2018.

By 2012, more structured and professionalized revolutionary media began to emerge. Networks such as Orient News, Sham Network, Zaman al-Wasl, and Enab Baladi took shape, while Rozana, Radio Al-Kul, and Radio Fresh established revolutionary broadcasting platforms. Magazines like *Tal'na 'Aal-Hurriya* and *Ain al-Madina* offered political commentary and cultural critique. Whether based within Syria or in exile, these outlets aimed to challenge the regime's narrative, counter misinformation campaigns by regional allies, and connect Syrians across geographic divides. According to interviews with media founders by the BBC, Al Jazeera, and Deutsche Welle, these networks struggled with funding but remained resilient in providing accurate information from the front lines.[2]

Women played a crucial and courageous role in this media transformation. Razan Zaitouneh, Sama Mohammed, and many others not only documented violations but also led media and legal advocacy campaigns. Their presence defied both the regime's oppression and traditional gender expectations. Reports compiled by the Free Women Foundation between 2015–2020 highlight the unique contribution of Syrian women in leading revolutionary journalism, organizing media campaigns, and reporting from conflict zones.[3]

Digital activism became the revolution's lifeline. Facebook pages and Twitter threads became protest bulletins and mobilization tools. YouTube channels broadcasted atrocities in real time. Activists used encrypted apps and trained peers in digital security, often drawing on resources from the Tactical Tech Collective, which conducted workshops and published guides for Syrian digital activists.[4] These technologies enabled resistance to persist even in besieged towns like Homs, Daraa, and Eastern Ghouta, where physical media presence was impossible.

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[2] Interviews with founders of Rozana, Radio Al-Kul, Orient News – BBC Arabic, Deutsche Welle, Al Jazeera Arabic, 2015–2019.

[3] Free Women Foundation, *Women in the Syrian Revolution*, 2015–2020.

[4] Tactical Tech Collective, *Digital Security for Syrian Activists*, Workshop Guides and Resources, 2014–2017.

But media resistance came at a cost. Journalists and media activists were systematically targeted—not only by the Assad regime but also by ISIS, HTS, and other armed groups. The Syrian Journalists Association and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) documented hundreds of cases of abductions, torture, and assassinations.[5] Iconic media centers like Radio Fresh in Kafranbel—led by the late Raed Fares—became beacons of satire and defiance. Through biting cartoons, banners, and humorous radio sketches, they challenged dictatorship and extremism alike, gaining global acclaim. Fares' legacy, now preserved in the Radio Fresh Archives and the Revolution Art Project, remains a testament to the power of wit in the darkest times.[6]

Alongside media resistance, a parallel revolution unfolded in the legal and human rights arena. Organizations like the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM), led by Mazen Darwish, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) began compiling meticulous documentation of war crimes and human rights abuses. While SOHR has faced criticism over its sourcing, its reports remain a primary reference point for international media. SNHR, regularly cited in UN reports, developed a robust database of violations categorized by type, location, and perpetrator.[7]

These legal documentation efforts contributed to historic war crimes cases. Syrian exiles worked with European legal teams to bring regime officials to justice under universal jurisdiction laws. The landmark trial in Koblenz, Germany—resulting in the conviction of Anwar Raslan and Eyad al-Gharib—was made possible by testimonies and evidence assembled by Syrian-led initiatives like the Caesar Files Group and SCM. Human rights reports, survivor testimonies, and photographs smuggled out of Syria played a pivotal role in these prosecutions. According to Amnesty International and the European Center for Constitutional and

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[5] Reporters Without Borders (RSF), *Annual Press Freedom Reports*, 2012–2022.

[6] Radio Fresh Archives; Revolution Art Project, Kafranbel Media Banners, 2013–2018.

[7] Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), *Annual Documentation Reports*, 2011–2023.

Human Rights (ECCHR), these cases represent a new model of transnational justice when traditional international mechanisms are blocked by geopolitical vetoes.[8]

Culture, too, became a weapon of resistance. From the graffiti in Homs to protest songs in Aleppo, Syrians used art to articulate hope, rage, and resilience. Political cartoons by Ali Ferzat, street banners from Kafranbel, and protest music turned the revolution into a living cultural force. Documentaries like *Return to Homs*, *Last Men in Aleppo*, and *The White Helmets*—the latter of which won an Academy Award—brought the Syrian struggle into living rooms around the world, evoking solidarity and sparking humanitarian action.[9]

Yet, despite these achievements, revolutionary media faced profound challenges. Limited and conditional funding often forced outlets to compromise independence or shut down entirely. The multiplicity of political and armed actors also led to fragmentation, with some media aligning with factional narratives. Disinformation campaigns by regime allies and the proliferation of fake news created further confusion, undermining trust in even the most credible sources. The work of journalists, many of whom were underpaid volunteers, became increasingly dangerous as the war dragged on.

Today, more than a decade after the revolution's outbreak, various initiatives are working to preserve the memory of this media and human rights struggle. Archival projects collect videos, testimonies, and articles to ensure that the sacrifices of Syria's truth-tellers are not forgotten. These efforts aim not only to document history but also to inform transitional justice, rebuild collective memory, and uphold the dignity of the revolution.

The Syrian revolutionary media movement—born in defiance, sustained through sacrifice, and immortalized through images and voices—remains one of the most courageous and transformative

[8] Amnesty International and ECCHR, *Justice in Europe: Syrian War Crimes Trials*, 2021.

[9] *The White Helmets*, directed by Orlando von Einsiedel; *Return to Homs*, *Last Men in Aleppo* – Academy Award and Sundance documentation, 2014–2018.

elements of the 2011 uprising. It offered the world an unfiltered window into tyranny and resilience. Its legacy will endure far beyond the fall of regimes or the shift of headlines.

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Part XI

The Political Settlement Track and the Failure of Initiatives (2016–2018)

As Syria's bloody conflict dragged on, international and regional powers began intensifying efforts to find a political solution that could halt the war and end the Syrian people's suffering. Between 2016 and 2018, the Syrian crisis witnessed a flurry of diplomatic activity and numerous initiatives aimed at mediating between opposing parties. However, shifting conditions on the ground and entrenched political divides complicated any real progress.

This period was marked by extreme volatility—combat operations decreased in some regions while intensifying in others. Foreign interventions deepened, and the humanitarian catastrophe worsened. While diplomatic opportunities appeared, deep disagreements between the regime and opposition persisted, further complicated by the emergence of new regional power dynamics.

This chapter provides a detailed account of the political initiatives launched during this period, particularly the Geneva conferences, the role of the United Nations, de-escalation agreements, and military developments on the ground. It also explores how these political efforts ultimately failed to bring about a genuine resolution to the conflict. It includes an analysis of competing tracks, such as the Astana Process, and the role of external actors in shaping—and hindering—the search for peace.

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The Geneva Process and Early Political Attempts (2016)

By 2016, Syria's civil war had entered its fifth year with no end in sight. Despite extensive foreign backing, neither the Assad regime nor the opposition had achieved decisive victory. The regime, buoyed by Russian airpower and Iranian ground forces, continued its military onslaught against rebel-held territories, while opposition factions—though at times controlling vast areas—remained disunited, under-resourced, and largely abandoned by the international community. In the face of this bloody stalemate, global and regional powers turned increasingly to political negotiations, seeking a diplomatic pathway out of the escalating catastrophe.

The first formal attempt to chart such a course came in June 2012 with the **Geneva I Communiqué**, which proposed the formation of a transitional governing body with full executive powers and mutual consent from both regime and opposition. It also called for a ceasefire, humanitarian access, constitutional reform, and UN-supervised elections. However, these proposals lacked enforcement mechanisms or timelines. As scholars and participants later acknowledged, the communiqué's fate was ultimately tied to developments on the battlefield, not the negotiating table.[1]

Between 2014 and 2017, multiple rounds of UN-sponsored talks were held under the Geneva framework—each met with growing skepticism. The key point of contention remained unchanged: the regime's insistence on keeping Bashar al-Assad in power clashed with the opposition's demand for a transitional government without Assad. Even

[1] Ahmad Tu'mah, *Negotiating with the Syrian Regime: An Assessment of the Geneva Track*, Harmoon Center for Studies, 2019.

as the opposition delegations became increasingly fragmented—with divisions between nationalist, Islamist, Kurdish, and independent factions—the regime's position remained consistent and emboldened by Russian diplomatic and military cover.[2] Geneva II and III faltered under these tensions, while Geneva IV made only cosmetic progress.

In August 2016, **Geneva VII** was convened amid intensifying Russian bombardment of Aleppo, which had already descended into a humanitarian catastrophe. The UN Special Envoy, **Staffan de Mistura**, attempted to revitalize the process by restructuring talks around four thematic "baskets": governance (including political transition), a new constitution, UN-supervised elections, and counterterrorism. The aim was to create a parallel dialogue that addressed urgent issues while circumventing the deadlock over Assad's fate.[3] Despite the carefully choreographed diplomatic effort, the regime and its allies derailed the process by refusing to address governance and constitutional reform, instead narrowing the agenda to counterterrorism—thus transforming negotiations into a tool for legitimizing military action.[4]

In early 2017, the Geneva process was increasingly sidelined by the emergence of a rival diplomatic track: the Astana Process, launched by Russia, Iran, and Türkiye. While it nominally claimed to support Geneva, Astana's real focus was military de-escalation, not political transition. The creation of so-called de-escalation zones led to temporary lulls in violence in areas like Eastern Ghouta, Idlib, and Daraa. Yet these zones were later exploited by the regime and Russia to launch coordinated offensives, culminating in the forcible reconquest of opposition strongholds—demonstrating that Astana, rather than fostering peace, provided a pretext for divide-and-conquer strategies.[5]

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[2] Aron Lund, *The Geneva Process and the Syrian Civil War*, Carnegie Middle East Center, 2016.

[3] United Nations, *Report of the UN Special Envoy for Syria on Geneva Talks*, August 2016.

[4] Al Jazeera Center for Studies, *Geneva and the Fate of the Syrian Revolution: Power Dynamics Analysis*, 2016.

[5] International Crisis Group, *Lessons from the Syrian De-escalation Zones*, Report No. 182, 2018.

While the opposition entered Geneva VII with cautious optimism, it left further weakened. The **High Negotiations Committee (HNC)** struggled to maintain unity, and internal disputes between different currents—ranging from the Kurdish PYD to Islamist groups—intensified. Attempts to build inclusive delegations, including civil society representatives and women's groups, proved largely symbolic. Women activists, despite being nominally included in UN consultations, were often sidelined from meaningful participation or decision-making roles.[6] International envoys frequently praised their presence, but in practice, they wielded no real influence over the process.

Throughout this period, Russia's dominance over the Syrian file became indisputable. The United States, under the Obama administration, focused primarily on counterterrorism, while Gulf countries retreated from assertive support for the opposition. UN mediation, though well-intentioned, was increasingly reduced to managing expectations rather than delivering breakthroughs. Geneva became a stage for diplomatic performance rather than substantive negotiation, and as opposition leaders and analysts later noted, the entire framework functioned more as a fig leaf for changing battlefield realities than as a genuine path to political transition.[7]

Ultimately, the Geneva and Astana tracks revealed an uncomfortable truth: a political solution was never the priority of the most powerful actors. Instead, diplomacy became a theatre for delay, deflection, and normalization of regime gains. The Assad regime used the talks to buy time, rebuild capacity, and reframe the revolution as a foreign-backed terrorist insurrection. The opposition failed to unify around a coherent and strategic vision, often entering negotiations with inconsistent positions and without leverage. Meanwhile, international actors—divided among themselves—shifted from advocating transitional justice to managing "stability," even if that meant preserving Assad's rule.

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[6] Syrian Women's Political Movement, *Participation and Marginalization in the Peace Process*, 2017.

[7] Charles Lister, *The Syrian Civil War: Geneva, Astana, and the Failure of Diplomacy*, Brookings Institution, 2017.

In the final analysis, these political attempts did not resolve the conflict, halt the suffering, or uphold the revolutionary aspirations. Rather, they marked the slow erosion of hope for a democratic transition. As the war raged on, it was the Syrian people—displaced, bombarded, and betrayed—who bore the cost in lives, dignity, and shattered dreams.

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37

The De-escalation Agreements and Their Collapse (2017)

In 2017, amid the deepening fragmentation of the Syrian conflict, a new diplomatic initiative emerged: the de-escalation agreements brokered by Russia, Türkiye, and Iran under the umbrella of the Astana Process. Marketed as a pragmatic alternative to the faltering Geneva talks, these agreements promised to reduce violence, facilitate humanitarian relief, and create localized ceasefires in key conflict zones. For a war-weary population and an increasingly sidelined international community, the initiative appeared—at least briefly—as a possible gateway to stabilization.

The initiative, however, was never merely about humanitarian relief. It reflected a deeper recalibration of the Syrian battlefield and its political landscape. Russia sought to reposition itself as the central power broker in Syria, supplanting Western-led diplomacy and reengineering the post-conflict order in its favor. Türkiye, concerned primarily with Kurdish advances near its southern border, engaged in the process to curb the expansion of the PYD and manage refugee flows. Iran, for its part, viewed the arrangement as an opportunity to consolidate its military and political presence in key areas of Syria, particularly in the strategic central and southern corridors. As such, the Astana Process—formally launched in Kazakhstan—was not so much a peace initiative as a geopolitical compact among the regime's backers and a selective partner.

The de-escalation agreements delineated specific geographic zones where hostilities were to be halted, humanitarian corridors opened, and mechanisms developed for detainee exchanges and eventual political reconciliation. The main de-escalation areas identified were Eastern Ghouta, Idlib province, northern Homs, and southern Syria, including Daraa and Quneitra. Each zone was to be monitored by the guarantor

states: Türkiye assumed responsibility for parts of the north, particularly Idlib, while Russia and Iran were assigned to oversee other areas. The agreements, however, lacked neutral enforcement mechanisms. No independent international body was empowered to verify compliance or to hold violators accountable—leaving implementation to the very actors involved in the conflict.[1]

On the ground, the de-escalation framework quickly unraveled. Eastern Ghouta, despite being designated a protected zone, was subjected to one of the war's most brutal campaigns. The regime and Russian forces intensified their siege throughout late 2017 and early 2018, culminating in massive bombardment, chemical weapons attacks, and forced evacuations under duress.[2] Civilians were starved, hospitals bombed, and entire neighborhoods leveled. As documented by the Syrian Justice and Accountability Centre and Human Rights Watch, the so-called "reconciliation agreements" that followed were essentially terms of surrender under siege warfare—offering residents a choice between displacement and death.[3]

In northern Homs, a similar pattern unfolded. Local truces gave way to systematic targeting, with regime forces exploiting temporary ceasefires to regroup before launching new offensives. Opposition-held towns were eventually emptied through forced displacement deals, with thousands relocated to Idlib. Southern Syria, particularly Daraa—the symbolic birthplace of the 2011 uprising—fell victim to the same strategy. Despite earlier agreements guaranteeing local autonomy, regime forces launched a swift military campaign in mid-2018, capturing territory and imposing new security arrangements heavily influenced by Iranian-backed militias.[4]

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[1] Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. *Text of the De-escalation Zone Agreement*, 2017.

[2] Human Rights Watch. *Surrender or Starve: The Use of Siege Warfare in Syria*, 2017.

[3] yrian Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC). *De-escalation or Massacres?*, 2018.

[4] Institute for the Study of War. *The Assad Regime's Campaign Strategy in De-escalation Zones*, 2019.

Idlib, the last major rebel-held enclave, remained temporarily under Turkish protection. But even here, the de-escalation framework proved fragile. The collapse of the 2018 Sochi Agreement, which had roots in the 2017 Astana framework, led to renewed bombardment and mass displacement. Turkish observation points were bypassed or encircled, and Russian airstrikes intensified throughout 2019 and 2020. The illusion of de-escalation vanished amid the roar of jets and the collapse of entire towns.[5]

What emerged, in retrospect, was a pattern of deliberate manipulation. The regime and its allies used the de-escalation zones not to halt the war, but to manage and sequence it. Each zone was isolated, weakened through siege or fragmentation, and then subdued—militarily or through coerced deals. Far from being tools for peace, the de-escalation agreements became instruments of tactical deception, enabling the regime to reclaim lost territory piecemeal while projecting diplomatic legitimacy. Meanwhile, the opposition forces were drawn into a false sense of security, politically fragmented, and eventually overwhelmed.[6]

The humanitarian consequences were devastating. Hundreds of thousands were forcibly displaced, particularly from Eastern Ghouta, Daraa, and northern Homs. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported severe obstruction of aid deliveries, with supposed humanitarian corridors often used as tools for population control and psychological warfare. Civilian trust in international diplomacy, already fragile, was shattered. Promises of protection were repeatedly broken, and the very powers tasked with ensuring security were complicit in the destruction[7]

The political fallout was no less severe. Iran deepened its entrenchment in Syria, particularly in areas vacated by the opposition, setting off alarm bells in neighboring Israel. Russia cemented its dominance as the final arbiter of Syria's fate, sidelining the UN-led

[5] Middle East Institute. *Russia's Real Strategy in Syria's De-escalation Zones*, 2018.

[6] International Crisis Group. *Lessons from the Syrian De-escalation Zones*, Report No. 182, 2018.

[7] United Nations OCHA. *Reports on Humanitarian Access in Syria*, 2017–2018.

Geneva process and effectively rewriting the rules of conflict resolution in its own image. Türkiye, though nominally a guarantor, found its influence diluted and increasingly reactive—trapped between managing refugee flows and containing Kurdish forces.

In the final analysis, the de-escalation agreements collapsed not because they failed to secure peace, but because they were never genuinely intended to. Their core design was tactical, not transformational. They served to freeze hostilities temporarily, fragment the opposition, and facilitate the regime's reconquest of territory under the cover of diplomacy. By the end of 2018, most of the designated zones had fallen back into regime hands. The Astana Process, while successful in recalibrating regional power balances, left Syria's political transition no closer to realization and its people further abandoned by the international system meant to protect them.[8]

[8] Syrian Memory Documentation Initiative. *Testimonies from Eastern Ghouta*, 2017.

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38

United Nations Efforts and the Role of Special Envoys (2017–2018)

Throughout the years of escalating violence in Syria, the United Nations remained actively engaged in seeking a political resolution to the crisis. Through the appointment of special envoys, the facilitation of negotiation tracks, and humanitarian initiatives, the UN aimed to mitigate the suffering of civilians and navigate toward a sustainable settlement. Yet the grim realities on the ground, compounded by regional rivalries and the entrenched intransigence of the Assad regime, consistently undermined these efforts.

In July 2014, Swedish-Italian diplomat Staffan de Mistura was appointed as UN Special Envoy for Syria. He inherited a paralyzed diplomatic process and a deeply polarized conflict. His mission was to revive political dialogue based on UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015), which called for a ceasefire, constitutional reform, and free elections under UN supervision. De Mistura initiated multiple rounds of talks in Geneva and worked tirelessly to engage both regime and opposition representatives, while attempting to bridge the growing disconnect between international resolutions and battlefield developments.[1]

His approach emphasized inclusivity, particularly the involvement of civil society organizations, women's networks, and technocratic voices. He helped establish the Women's Advisory Board and consultative mechanisms aimed at broadening participation beyond the armed and political factions. While commendable in spirit, these initiatives were

[1] United Nations Security Council Briefing by Staffan de Mistura, December 19, 2018.

largely symbolic, consistently sidelined by the entrenched power dynamics between the regime and its opponents.[2]

De Mistura also attempted a "step-by-step" confidence-building strategy—prioritizing local ceasefires, humanitarian corridors, and incremental agreements over grand political solutions. But this approach ran into familiar roadblocks. Ceasefires were frequently violated, humanitarian corridors were weaponized or manipulated, and the regime repeatedly used negotiations as a tactical delay while pressing its military advantage elsewhere. Efforts to unify the opposition—already fractured by ideology, geography, and foreign patronage—yielded only partial results, while the regime, emboldened by Russian and Iranian backing, categorically refused to entertain any serious transition that would remove President Bashar al-Assad from power.[3]

Meanwhile, the humanitarian crisis in Syria intensified. As siege warfare escalated in places like Eastern Ghouta, Deir Ezzor, and northern Homs, the UN coordinated convoys, aid drops, and temporary ceasefire arrangements. While some aid did reach those in need, most efforts were marred by regime obstruction, security challenges, and the politicization of relief access.[4] UN Security Council resolutions such as 2139 (2014)—which demanded unhindered humanitarian access—were routinely flouted without consequence. Humanitarian aid became a bargaining chip in the regime's broader campaign of coercion, and the UN's failure to enforce its own resolutions further eroded its credibility in the eyes of many Syrians.[5]

De Mistura's tenure was also marked by a deepening of geopolitical fault lines. The divergence between Western and regional powers—particularly between the U.S., Russia, Iran, and Türkiye—turned Syria into a diplomatic deadlock. The rise of extremist factions such as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in opposition-held territories complicated the image and

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[2] Carnegie Middle East Center, *Staffan de Mistura and the Limits of Mediation*, 2018.
[3] Foreign Affairs, *The UN and the Collapse of Syria's Peace Process*, 2019.
[4] United Nations OCHA, *Reports on Humanitarian Access in Besieged Areas*, 2017–2018.
[5] Ibid.

legitimacy of the opposition, enabling the regime to shift international attention away from political reform toward counterterrorism. At critical junctures, the regime timed major military operations—such as the assault on Eastern Ghouta—to coincide with or immediately follow negotiation rounds, demonstrating a consistent pattern of spoiler behavior.[6]

By the end of 2018, it was increasingly clear that the Geneva process had been overtaken by events. The rise of the Astana and Sochi tracks—led by Russia, Türkiye, and Iran—gradually sidelined the UN. These parallel forums prioritized short-term military de-escalation over long-term political transition, signaling a shift in international diplomacy away from rights-based frameworks toward pragmatic power-sharing arrangements. Despite his persistence, De Mistura resigned in November 2018, delivering a sobering final briefing to the Security Council in which he acknowledged the UN's diminishing leverage and the failure of sustained mediation to yield results.[7]

The legacy of the UN's involvement during this period is mixed at best. While its humanitarian arms remained active and essential, its political efforts were increasingly seen as toothless. The lack of enforcement mechanisms, the inability to hold violators accountable, and the symbolic rather than substantive inclusion of civil society all contributed to the collapse of public trust. For many Syrians, the UN had become a bystander—at worst complicit through silence, at best powerless in the face of geopolitical manipulation.

The period between 2017 and 2018 marked a turning point. While the regime reconsolidated its hold over key territories, the diplomatic process lost momentum. Geneva's symbolic framework continued, but its core premise—negotiated transition—was abandoned. Military logic, not political compromise, became the dominant force. For a population devastated by years of war, displacement, and siege, this failure deepened the despair and further closed the door on the possibility of international justice or credible political change.

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[6] Syrian Memory Project, *Interviews with Negotiation Delegation Members*, 2017–2018.

[7] International Crisis Group, *Keeping the Geneva Process Alive*, 2018.

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39

Astana and Sochi: Consolidating Power, Not Building Peace

As the Geneva political track floundered in the face of regime intransigence and opposition fragmentation, a new axis of diplomacy emerged—one not grounded in international law or UN oversight, but in regional power realignments. In January 2017, Russia, with the backing of Iran and Türkiye, launched the Astana Process, a parallel negotiation framework focused more on battlefield management than political transition. While marketed as a means to reduce violence, facilitate humanitarian aid, and foster a ceasefire, Astana and its follow-up track in Sochi quickly evolved into instruments for consolidating control rather than negotiating peace.[1]

The first Astana meeting, held weeks after the regime's recapture of Aleppo, signaled a decisive shift in the Syrian conflict. With Russia and Iran backing the regime and Türkiye aligned with opposition interests, the talks presented an appearance of balance. However, in substance, they were designed to sideline Western actors, bypass UN frameworks like Resolution 2254, and redefine the conflict as a regional security issue rather than a revolution for political change.[2] The outcome was the establishment of four main "de-escalation zones": in Idlib, Eastern Ghouta, northern Homs, and southern Syria (Daraa and Quneitra). These zones, theoretically designed to reduce hostilities, became staging grounds for successive regime offensives.

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[1] Ahmad Abazeid, *From Geneva to Astana: When Politics Retreats and Arms Prevail*, 2018.

[2] Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, *The Astana Process: An Analytical Reading*, 2018; International Crisis Group, *Russia, Türkiye, and Iran in Syria: The Astana Process*, Report No. 190, 2018.

Rather than ensuring sustained calm, the agreements allowed the regime and its allies to isolate and eliminate rebel strongholds sequentially. After Eastern Ghouta's brutal siege and fall in 2018, the regime turned to Daraa and northern Homs with similar tactics. Despite being a nominal guarantor, Türkiye struggled to contain militant actors like Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Idlib and was increasingly preoccupied with its security priorities vis-à-vis Kurdish forces in the north.[3] The Astana framework, in practice, dismantled the opposition's territorial control under the guise of ceasefire arrangements and reframed military conquest as "conflict management."

In January 2018, Russia expanded this approach through the Sochi National Dialogue Congress, which it claimed would jumpstart constitutional reform. With handpicked regime representatives and a limited selection of opposition figures—many under regional patronage—Russia convened the talks with little international legitimacy. Key blocs like the High Negotiations Committee (HNC) boycotted the event, arguing it was a clear attempt to rewrite the narrative of transition on Moscow's terms.[4]

One of Sochi's few tangible outcomes was a declaration to form a Constitutional Committee, with representatives from the regime, opposition, and civil society. While this committee was later transferred to Geneva under UN auspices, it carried the baggage of its origins: a process initiated by the regime's main military backer, lacking broad-based legitimacy or leverage. By the time the committee convened in Geneva in 2019, it had already lost political momentum. Regime delegates repeatedly obstructed proceedings, refused to engage in substantive debate—especially over executive powers and presidential authority—and turned the forum into a space of procedural deadlock.[5] As Sam Heller and the Carnegie Middle East Center noted, the

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[3] Al Jazeera Center for Studies, *Astana and Sochi: Russia's Management of the Syrian Scene*, 2020.

[4] Al Jazeera, *Interviews with Naser Al-Hariri on Sochi*, 2018; Omran Center for Strategic Studies, *Sochi and the Constitutional Committee: Diverging Paths*, 2019.

[5] United Nations Special Envoy Reports, *Updates on the Constitutional Committee and Geneva Process*, 2019–2021.

committee failed to agree on a single constitutional article between 2019 and 2021, symbolizing the erosion of both international will and Syrian agency in the political process.[6]

The broader legacy of Astana and Sochi is one of tactical success for the Assad regime and its allies, and strategic failure for Syria's revolution and its aspirations. Astana fragmented opposition-held areas, co-opted factions through ceasefire guarantees, and normalized the foreign military presence of Russia, Iran, and Türkiye within Syria's sovereign borders. Sochi reframed core revolutionary demands—justice, accountability, and democratic transition—as mere questions of constitutional reform, effectively shrinking the scope of negotiations to technical debates under the watchful eyes of Moscow.[7]

The United Nations, once the central actor in the Syrian file, was reduced to an observer. It facilitated the meetings of the Constitutional Committee but was sidelined from shaping its agenda or enforcing its deadlines. As Russian dominance grew, and the Western diplomatic response faded into caution and fatigue, the UN's political mission became largely ceremonial. Meanwhile, millions of Syrians remained trapped in camps, under bombardment, or in exile—witnessing the transformation of their revolution into a managed stalemate.

What Astana and Sochi ultimately achieved was not peace, but containment. By replacing genuine transition with carefully choreographed diplomacy, these tracks insulated the regime from accountability and enabled the gradual reimposition of state control under the illusion of negotiation. For Syrians, the message was clear: the revolution's moral weight and popular legitimacy had been overwritten by military calculus and geopolitical bargaining.

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[6] Sam Heller, *The Constitutional Committee: A Trojan Horse for Syrian Reform?*, International Crisis Group, 2019.

[7] Carnegie Middle East Center, *From Geneva to Sochi: Russian Diplomacy in Syria*, 2018; Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Final Statement of Sochi Conference*, 2018.

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Astana and Sochi: Russia's Hijack of Syria's Peace Track

As the Geneva negotiations failed to achieve any meaningful breakthrough, Russia—backed by Iran and Türkiye—sought to establish a parallel diplomatic framework grounded less in political transition and more in military realities. Cloaked in the language of "de-escalation" and "stabilization," the Astana Process, launched in early 2017, offered an alternative track that downplayed the revolutionary roots of the Syrian conflict and instead reframed it as a regional security crisis. Unlike the Geneva talks, which were sponsored by the United Nations and centered on a vision of democratic transition, Astana focused on freezing military fronts and managing ceasefires. The fall of Aleppo to regime forces in late 2016 marked a turning point—handing Moscow the upper hand in both battlefield and diplomacy.[1]

The first rounds of Astana talks began in January 2017 and brought together delegations from the Syrian regime and armed opposition, under the sponsorship of the "three guarantors": Russia, Iran, and Türkiye. Though Türkiye had long been seen as a patron of the opposition, its participation in the Astana format created a new balance of power—effectively integrating it into a trilateral arrangement that diluted the influence of Western and Arab actors. The immediate result was the establishment of four de-escalation zones: in Idlib, northern Homs, Eastern Ghouta, and southern Syria (Daraa and Quneitra).[2]

Initially presented as a humanitarian initiative to reduce violence and facilitate aid delivery, the de-escalation zones quickly revealed their true

[1] Hadi al-Bahra, *The Astana Track: Between De-escalation and Regime Empowerment*, Syrian Center for Political Studies, 2020.

[2] International Crisis Group, *Lessons from the Astana Process in Syria*, 2019.

purpose. The regime and its allies used them as a tactical pause between military offensives. After securing one area through siege, bombardment, and coerced surrender deals, they moved to the next. Eastern Ghouta fell in early 2018 after a devastating campaign marked by starvation and chemical attacks. Daraa and northern Homs followed, while Idlib remained the last standing zone, increasingly dominated by Turkish-controlled armed factions and extremist groups like Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Russia's strategy, according to numerous analysts, amounted to "surrender through negotiation"—a campaign to reestablish regime control incrementally while discrediting the original aims of the revolution.[3]

In parallel, Russia convened the Sochi "Syrian National Dialogue Congress" in January 2018. Framed as a platform for inclusive Syrian dialogue, the event brought together regime representatives, government-aligned opposition figures, and selected civil society members. However, major opposition blocs, including the High Negotiations Committee (HNC), boycotted the conference, criticizing it as a stage-managed attempt to legitimize the regime and derail the Geneva track. Many Syrian activists and political figures denounced the Sochi gathering as a conference for "whitewashing Assad" rather than building peace.[4]

The main outcome of Sochi was the declaration to form a Constitutional Committee, tasked with drafting a new Syrian constitution. While the United Nations was nominally involved in overseeing the committee's formation, the process was deeply politicized from the start. Russia played a dominant role in shaping the list of participants, especially the so-called "civil society" group, which included names aligned with regime interests.[5] The committee's mandate was limited to constitutional reform, deliberately sidestepping the broader

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[3] Abdulwahab Asi, *The Implications of the Astana and Sochi Tracks on the Syrian Revolution*, Badael Journal, 2022.

[4] Fabrice Balanche, *Syria's Sochi Conference: Neither Peace nor Political Transition*, The Washington Institute, 2018.

[5] Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, *Report on the Syrian Constitutional Committee*, 2019.

demand for a full political transition based on UNSC Resolution 2254, which had called for the creation of a transitional governing body with full executive powers.[6]

As the Astana and Sochi tracks progressed, their objectives became increasingly clear. They did not aim to resolve the conflict through justice or political transformation, but to normalize the regime's role, fragment the opposition, and empty the Geneva process of substance. The demand for regime change was effectively shelved. The Syrian regime, now reframed as a "negotiating partner," gained further international legitimacy. Some opposition factions were drawn into local truces and security arrangements that allowed them to maintain temporary autonomy in exchange for accepting regime authority. Meanwhile, the United Nations was gradually reduced to a facilitator rather than a principal actor, as the center of diplomacy shifted from Geneva to Astana and Sochi—a transition that served Moscow's broader strategy of presenting itself as the arbiter of Syria's future.[7]

By 2024, the Constitutional Committee had achieved nothing of substance. Sessions were suspended, and international attention shifted elsewhere amid renewed revolutionary activity inside Syria. The illusion that Astana or Sochi could produce a lasting political solution collapsed under the weight of reality. These tracks, far from facilitating peace, acted as mechanisms of delay, fragmentation, and regime consolidation.[8]

Yet beyond the tactical gains and diplomatic maneuvers, the experience of Astana and Sochi exposed a fundamental truth: no political process in Syria can succeed if it ignores justice—the accountability of war criminals, the right of the displaced, and the aspirations of a people who rose demanding freedom, dignity, and democratic governance. Any solution that does not emerge from the will of Syrians themselves—free

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[6] United Nations Reports on the Geneva and Constitutional Committee Process, 2016–2023.

[7] Jusoor Center for Studies, *An Analysis of the Astana and Sochi Tracks and Their Impact on Political Transition in Syria*, 2021.

[8] Carnegie Middle East Center, *How the Syrian Opposition Evolved Since 2011*, 2020.

from foreign manipulation and coercion—will remain illegitimate and ultimately unsustainable.[9]

[9] Ibid.

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The Escalation of Military Conflict and Shifting Power Dynamics (2017–2018)

Between 2017 and 2018, the Syrian conflict underwent a decisive transformation. The battlefield, once fragmented among regime forces, opposition factions, Kurdish militias, and extremist groups, began to tilt heavily in favor of the Assad regime. With overwhelming air support from Russia and ground forces composed of Iranian-sponsored militias and loyalist troops, the regime launched a series of coordinated offensives that systematically dismantled opposition-held areas across the country. These campaigns not only redrew Syria's military map but also reshaped the political calculus of the conflict.

Aleppo Falls: The Beginning of the End for Opposition Strongholds

Although the fall of eastern Aleppo occurred in December 2016, its impact defined the strategic direction of the conflict well into 2017. Aleppo was more than just a city—it had become a symbol of revolutionary resilience and urban resistance. After enduring years of siege, aerial bombardment, and starvation, the city's fall marked both a devastating psychological blow and a strategic victory for the regime. It demonstrated the effectiveness of Russian military support and emboldened the regime to replicate this model in other opposition-controlled regions.[1]

Following Aleppo's fall, the regime solidified control over key supply lines in the north and turned its military attention to other rebel-held pockets closer to the capital and southern frontiers.

Eastern Ghouta: A Siege of Starvation and Surrender

[1] Al Jazeera Investigations. *The Fall of Aleppo: A Turning Point*, 2017.

In 2018, the Assad regime shifted focus to Eastern Ghouta, a densely populated enclave near Damascus that had been under siege for years. This area had remained one of the last major opposition bastions close to the capital and was home to nearly 400,000 civilians living under severe shortages of food, medicine, and fuel.

The regime, supported by relentless Russian airstrikes, escalated its offensive using heavy artillery, cluster munitions, and suspected chemical weapons—including the infamous Douma chemical attack in April 2018. Entire neighborhoods were flattened. Hospitals, schools, and civil defense centers were deliberately targeted.[2] The military onslaught was accompanied by a massive media campaign to portray the opposition as terrorists, justifying the scale of the assault.

By March 2018, Eastern Ghouta was recaptured through a series of forced surrender agreements. Tens of thousands were displaced to northern Syria in what became known as "evacuation deals"—a euphemism for coerced population transfer.[3] The siege and fall of Eastern Ghouta remain one of the darkest chapters of the war and a textbook example of siege warfare as a tool of political control.[4]

Southern Syria: Daraa and the Collapse of the Uprising's Cradle

The regime then moved swiftly to southern Syria, focusing on the provinces of Daraa and Quneitra—the symbolic birthplace of the 2011 uprising. With Russian-brokered mediation, many opposition groups in the south surrendered under "reconciliation agreements." Though these agreements promised local autonomy and immunity, they were soon violated. Arbitrary arrests, forced conscription, and assassinations of former opposition leaders became commonplace.[5]

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[2] Human Rights Watch. "*Death Is Walking Beside Us*: Attacks on Civilians in Eastern Ghouta", 2018.

[3] United Nations Human Rights Council. *Report on the Siege of Eastern Ghouta*, March 2018.

[4] Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR). *Reports on Eastern Ghouta and Southern Syria*, 2017–2018.

[5] International Crisis Group. *Keeping the Calm in Southern Syria*, 2018.

In Daraa, the initial terms of the surrender allowed some factions to retain light arms, but the regime gradually reasserted full control. Russia played a dual role—guarantor of the agreements and enforcer of regime demands—rendering the opposition powerless and fragmented.[6]

Idlib: A Fragile Fortress Under Turkish Oversight

With other regions subdued, Idlib remained the final stronghold of the armed opposition. Ostensibly protected under the Astana de-escalation agreements, Idlib became a haven for displaced fighters and civilians from previously surrendered regions. The province, however, was not immune to regime ambition. It experienced near-daily shelling, airstrikes, and assassinations targeting opposition leaders and humanitarian workers.[7]

Idlib's complex landscape—shared between moderate rebels, extremist factions such as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, and Turkish military posts—made it a ticking time bomb. Türkiye, while acting as a guarantor in the Astana framework, struggled to control jihadist elements and prevent regime escalation. Though a full-scale regime invasion was deferred during this period, the threat loomed constantly, with observers describing Idlib as "a zone of frozen catastrophe".[8]

Consequences of the Regime's Military Advances

The regime's successive military victories between 2017 and 2018 had far-reaching consequences across diplomatic, humanitarian, and military spheres:

- **Diplomatic Leverage:** With control over most major urban centers and key highways, the Assad regime entered diplomatic forums with newfound confidence. The opposition, fractured and territorially diminished, lost significant leverage in international negotiations.

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[6] SNHR. *Reports on Daraa Violations Post-Reconciliation*, 2018.

[7] Carnegie Middle East Center. *Idlib's Precarious Future*, 2018.

[8] Jusoor Center for Studies. *Idlib under the Astana Framework: Fragile Peace and Escalating Tensions*, 2018.

- **Humanitarian Catastrophe:** Each campaign brought massive civilian displacement, destruction of infrastructure, and a worsening of humanitarian conditions. Hundreds of thousands were forced into camps in Idlib and northern Aleppo, while siege survivors carried the scars of trauma and deprivation.
- **Opposition Fragmentation:** As key enclaves fell, surviving opposition groups were pushed into ever-smaller areas, often under the control of rival factions or external patrons. This fragmentation eroded any semblance of unified political leadership and further complicated the opposition's role in peace talks.

The Shift from Revolution to Containment

By the end of 2018, the Syrian conflict had entered a new phase. The dream of a victorious revolution had given way to a brutal status quo where the regime, backed by global and regional powers, had reasserted dominance through overwhelming force. But victory did not mean peace. The structural causes of the conflict—authoritarian repression, sectarian divisions, and foreign interference—remained intact.

The regime's approach had never been one of reconciliation but of total control. Civilians in recaptured areas faced harassment, conscription, and state surveillance. The reconstruction narrative advanced by Damascus and its allies rang hollow in the face of destroyed neighborhoods, displaced populations, and impunity for war crimes.

These military gains solidified the regime's grip on territory but deepened the moral and political bankruptcy of any future shaped in its image.

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Regional and International Shifts and Their Impact on the Crisis (2017–2018)

Between 2017 and 2018, Syria's protracted conflict underwent a transformation that was as much geopolitical as it was military. Foreign powers deepened their entrenchment in the Syrian landscape, reshaping the balance of power in ways that undercut any remaining hopes for a meaningful political resolution. These years witnessed the consolidation of new spheres of influence, the decline of international diplomacy, and the further marginalization of Syrian voices in determining their own future.

Russia and Iran: From Military Support to Geopolitical Entrenchment

By this period, Russia and Iran had moved beyond mere intervention and evolved into principal architects of the conflict's direction. Russia's airpower proved decisive in key regime offensives, including the battles for Aleppo, Eastern Ghouta, and Daraa. Its presence was not only military but increasingly diplomatic, as Moscow positioned itself as the central broker of negotiations, sidelining the UN-led Geneva track through the Astana and Sochi processes.[1]

Iran, on the other hand, pursued a more subterranean yet expansive strategy. Through a network of transnational militias—including Hezbollah, Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), Afghan Fatemiyoun fighters, and local loyalist groups—Tehran entrenched itself across Syria.[2] Its objectives extended beyond preserving Assad's rule to establishing a permanent corridor of influence stretching from Iran to

[1] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *The Astana Process Six Years On.*
[2] Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), *The Evolution of Russian and Iranian Cooperation in Syria.*

the Mediterranean, via Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. This "Shia crescent" raised alarms not only in the Arab Gulf but also in Israel and Western capitals.

Israel: Airstrikes and a Shadow War Against Iran

Israel responded with increasing urgency to Iran's deepening military presence near its northern border. Tel Aviv launched a series of precision airstrikes targeting Iranian weapons shipments, militia bases, and Revolutionary Guard installations—particularly around Damascus and southern Syria.[3] Though rarely acknowledged publicly, these operations were part of a shadow war aimed at preventing the establishment of a new Iranian front on Israel's doorstep. This escalation added another layer of volatility to the conflict, with the risk of regional spillover ever present.

Türkiye: Between Opposition Patron and Security-Driven Actor

Türkiye's role during this phase grew more complex and increasingly focused on its national security. While continuing to provide support for elements of the Syrian opposition, Ankara shifted its strategic priorities toward curbing the rise of Kurdish autonomy in Syria's north.[4] Fearing a contiguous Kurdish-controlled region governed by the YPG (People's Protection Units), which it views as an extension of the PKK, Türkiye launched two major cross-border operations:

- **Operation Euphrates Shield (2016–2017)** targeted ISIS and Kurdish positions west of the Euphrates.
- **Operation Olive Branch (2018)** captured the Kurdish-held city of Afrin, altering demographic and political realities in the region.[5]

At the same time, Türkiye co-sponsored the Astana talks with Russia and Iran, seeking to shape outcomes diplomatically while securing zones of influence near its border. This dual role—military actor and

[3] Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), *Global Conflict Tracker: Civil War in Syria*.
[4] Al Jazeera, *Astana Agreement and De-escalation Zones – News and Analysis*.
[5] Wikipedia, *Operation Euphrates Shield*, *Operation Olive Branch*.

diplomatic guarantor—reflected Ankara's pragmatic pivot from revolutionary idealism to hard-nosed security politics.

Gulf States: Strategic Retrenchment and Recalibration

Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other Gulf states began retreating from their earlier assertive stance against the Assad regime. With the war dragging on and opposition prospects dimming, these actors reassessed their involvement. Some opened quiet channels with Russia, seeing it as the new powerbroker in Syria. Others shifted their focus from regime change to containing Iranian influence, especially after perceived Western disengagement and the prioritization of counterterrorism over political transition.[6]

This recalibration marked a turning point: the Arab world's leading powers were no longer united behind the Syrian revolution. Their conflicting goals and waning support fractured the opposition further and allowed Assad to project growing legitimacy on the international stage.

Western Powers: Narrow Focus and Strategic Ambiguity

The United States and its European allies largely narrowed their objectives in Syria to counterterrorism—specifically, defeating ISIS. Through military support to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition of Kurdish and Arab fighters, Washington played a decisive role in dismantling the so-called ISIS caliphate. However, U.S. policy remained vague and hesitant regarding the broader conflict.

- There was no serious push to revive the Geneva process or hold the regime accountable for war crimes.
- Support for the opposition, particularly non-Kurdish factions, dwindled amid fears of extremism and lack of cohesion.

This disengagement created a vacuum quickly filled by Russia and Iran. The lack of Western commitment to a political transition

[6] UN Office of the Special Envoy for Syria, *Staffan de Mistura Reports*.

demoralized the opposition and signaled to Assad that military victory, not negotiation, was the path forward.[7]

Strangling Civil Society and Local Governance

As foreign powers carved out zones of influence, Syria's revolutionary civil society—once a source of democratic innovation and grassroots resilience—came under siege. Local councils in opposition areas struggled to survive under bombardment, siege, or absorption by foreign-backed authorities. In northern Syria, some were integrated into Turkish-controlled administrative frameworks; in others, they collapsed altogether as military rule took over. Activists, journalists, and community leaders were often arrested, killed, or forced into exile, leaving a void in civilian leadership.

Humanitarian Fallout: Mass Displacement and Refugee Strain

The intensifying campaigns of 2017–2018 displaced hundreds of thousands of civilians. Those expelled from Eastern Ghouta, southern Syria, and other fallen areas flooded Idlib and the northern border regions. This created massive pressure on humanitarian infrastructure, particularly in camps and informal shelters. Neighboring countries—Türkiye, Lebanon, and Jordan—struggled to cope, while European countries hardened their immigration policies in response to rising populist backlash. The global refugee crisis, now in its seventh year, remained one of the most visible human costs of international failure.

Diplomacy Without Resolve: A Stalled Political Track

Despite ongoing diplomatic rounds—whether through Geneva, Astana, or Sochi—no real breakthrough emerged. The Assad regime, emboldened by battlefield successes and protected by Russia, consistently blocked concessions. The opposition, fragmented and under pressure from multiple patrons, failed to present a united front. UN efforts, though persistent, lacked enforcement power, and were steadily sidelined.

[7] UNHCR, *Syria Refugee Crisis Explained.*

Ultimately, international diplomacy became a series of theatrical negotiations, lacking teeth or political will. The core issues—accountability, political transition, refugee return, and reconstruction—remained unresolved.

The years 2017 and 2018 marked a decisive geopolitical shift in Syria's war. Russia and Iran entrenched themselves as the regime's protectors and powerbrokers. Türkiye secured its border interests while adapting to the realities of shifting alliances. The Gulf States recalibrated, and the West retreated. Amid these developments, the Syrian people continued to suffer under bombardment, displacement, and betrayal. The revolution's early dream of freedom and dignity was replaced by foreign agendas and brutal pragmatism. What emerged was not peace, but a fractured country under competing spheres of control—and a deepening sense of abandonment among Syrians.

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Part XII

The Syrian Democratic Forces and the Kurdish Self-Administration

43

Between Separatist Ambitions and Strategic Alliances

As the Syrian conflict deepened after 2012, a new actor emerged in the country's north and east—an actor shaped by ideological roots, military pragmatism, and shifting international alliances. What began as Kurdish-led militias seizing opportunity in the security vacuum soon evolved into a powerful political-military project: the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, led by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Rise of a Military Force from Ideological Roots

With the Syrian regime's partial withdrawal from northeastern areas such as Qamishli, Hasakah, and Kobani (Ayn al-Arab), the PYD swiftly filled the vacuum, establishing local control through its militia, the People's Protection Units (YPG), and later the Women's Protection Units (YPJ). These forces operated under the broader ideological framework of "democratic confederalism," a concept developed by imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan.[1]

In 2015, following the strategic Battle of Kobani and the intensification of the war against ISIS, the SDF was formally established with U.S. support. Marketed as a multi-ethnic coalition, the SDF included Arab, Syriac, and other local factions. However, its leadership and structure remained overwhelmingly Kurdish and under PYD influence.[2] U.S. airpower, intelligence, and logistical support enabled the

[1] Charles Lister, *Profiling the Syrian Democratic Forces*, Middle East Institute, 2017.
[2] International Crisis Group, *Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria*, 2017.

SDF to gain vast territories, including Raqqa and parts of Deir ez-Zor, despite being majority-Arab areas.

A New Political Project in the Northeast

By 2014, the PYD declared the establishment of a self-administration across three cantons: Jazira, Kobani, and Afrin. These later expanded to encompass newly captured areas such as Manbij, Tabqa, Raqqa, and large parts of Deir ez-Zor—forming what became known as the "Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria." Although it presented itself as inclusive and representative, in practice, the political and administrative apparatus remained tightly controlled by the PYD,[3] with limited meaningful representation for local Arab communities.

The ideological framework of the administration emphasized grassroots governance and gender equality, yet was marked by centralized decision-making and the dominance of the PYD and its security institutions. Critics argued that the model replicated the authoritarian patterns of the regime it claimed to reject.

Tangled Web of Regional and International Relations

The SDF's position was shaped as much by geopolitics as by local developments. Its alliance with the United States—cemented by the shared fight against ISIS—was both its greatest strength and its most controversial feature. While U.S. forces deployed across SDF-held territories and provided key military assistance, Washington's portrayal of the SDF as a moderate, multi-ethnic force failed to convince Türkiye and parts of the Arab opposition.

Türkiye viewed the SDF as inseparable from the PKK, which it considers a terrorist threat. Between 2016 and 2019, Ankara launched three major military operations—Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring—capturing Afrin, Tal Abyad, and Ras al-Ayn. These offensives reshaped the map and exposed the SDF's military vulnerability. In response, the SDF increasingly leaned on Russia and the

[3] Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, "The Kurdish Self-Administration in Syria," 2021.

Assad regime, particularly in border areas like Manbij and Ayn Issa, where regime troops were deployed to deter further Turkish advances.[4]

Simultaneously, the SDF engaged in cautious dialogue with the Syrian regime, seeking a political arrangement that would secure recognition of its administrative autonomy. However, Damascus, wary of legitimizing any separatist structure, consistently refused to formally recognize the Autonomous Administration, offering instead vague promises of decentralization under regime control.

Russia, for its part, capitalized on the SDF's isolation to expand its influence. Moscow positioned itself as a mediator between the SDF and Damascus while maintaining ties with Türkiye. Iran's involvement was more indirect but equally significant. As long as the SDF did not interfere with Iranian routes and militia activity in Deir ez-Zor and Al-Bukamal, Tehran tolerated its presence.

Documented Violations and the Arab Discontent

Despite its media-savvy image as a force of liberation, the SDF has been accused of serious human rights violations, particularly in Arab-majority areas. These include forced displacement of civilians under the pretext of counterterrorism, especially in Raqqa, Hasakah, and Deir ez-Zor.[5] Numerous families were expelled or prevented from returning to their homes, fostering deep resentment among local populations.

Reports from Human Rights Watch, the Syrian Network for Human Rights, and other monitors have documented the SDF's recruitment of child soldiers, arbitrary arrests, and the suppression of political dissent.[6] Many young Arabs were detained on allegations of ISIS affiliation or opposition to the administration, often held without trial and subjected to abuse in detention facilities.

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[4] Nawar Shaaban, "The SDF and Political-Military Transformations," Jusoor Center for Studies, 2019.

[5] Human Rights Watch, *Under Kurdish Rule*, June 2014.

[6] Syrian Network for Human Rights, "SDF Violations Against Civilians," 2018–2022.

The SDF also strictly controlled civil space, closing local media outlets, arresting journalists, and dissolving councils or organizations that challenged its political project. In addition, the SDF-run camps housing thousands of ISIS-affiliated detainees—including women and children—remain in dire condition, with inadequate medical care, education, or legal oversight. Camps like al-Hol and Roj have become symbols of the administration's unresolved humanitarian burden.[7]

Conclusion: An Experiment Under Fire

The SDF and the Kurdish Autonomous Administration emerged from the chaos of Syria's civil war as a bold experiment in local governance and military autonomy. Yet the project remains deeply polarizing. To its defenders, it represents a bulwark against both ISIS and Assad. To its critics—especially many Arab communities—it mirrors the authoritarianism of the very regime the revolution sought to overthrow.

Its dependence on foreign military backing, its suppression of dissent, and its ethnic imbalance in governance continue to undermine its legitimacy. As of 2024, the Autonomous Administration stands at a crossroads: squeezed between Turkish threats, uneasy cooperation with Damascus, and a receding American commitment. Whether it evolves into a lasting political force or collapses under pressure will depend not only on military calculations, but on its ability—or failure—to build genuine local legitimacy and reconcile with Syria's broader revolutionary aspirations.

[7] UN OHCHR, Reports of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, 2016–2021.

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SDF Leadership and Its Connection to the PKK

The evolution of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) into a dominant actor in northeastern Syria is inseparable from the ideological, structural, and operational lineage it shares with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Established in 2003, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) is widely acknowledged as the Syrian offshoot of the PKK—a group designated as a terrorist organization by Türkiye, the United States, and the European Union. While the PYD has long claimed independence, its ideological foundations, leadership structure, and military strategies all point to an enduring dependency on the PKK, particularly its founder and spiritual guide, Abdullah Öcalan.[1]

Öcalan's doctrine of "democratic confederalism," adapted from Marxist-Leninist principles, forms the philosophical core of both the PYD and the military apparatus it built. These ideas, centered on decentralized governance, gender equality, and ecological sustainability, are upheld more in rhetoric than in inclusive political practice. They serve as the banner under which the SDF was formed in 2015, largely in response to the U.S.-led coalition's search for a local partner in the war against ISIS. Despite its branding as a multiethnic, inclusive force, the SDF's command structure has remained overwhelmingly Kurdish and PYD-led, with deep PKK affiliations.[2]

At the heart of the SDF's leadership is Mazloum Abdi (also known as Ferhat Şahin), its general commander. Abdi is a longtime PKK veteran

[1] Omran Center for Strategic Studies, *SDF and the PKK: Between Official Denial and Structural Parallels*, 2019.

[2] International Crisis Group, *Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria*, 2017.

trained in the Qandil Mountains and considered a top field commander within the organization. Under his leadership, the SDF has acted as both a military partner to U.S. forces and a political arm of the PYD's wider goals.[3] Abdi's ability to navigate high-level diplomatic engagement with the U.S. Central Command has made him a strategic asset in Washington, despite Türkiye's classification of him as a terrorist with direct responsibility for attacks against Turkish targets.

Other key figures reinforce the PYD-PKK link. Ilham Ahmed, formerly the president of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC)—the SDF's political wing—is a seasoned PYD member who has led diplomatic outreach to Western capitals. Her polished presence in Washington and Brussels masks the deeper ideological cohesion between her political mission and PKK doctrine. Similarly, Redur Khalil, the SDF's long-standing spokesperson, has played a central role in shaping the group's international image while distancing it rhetorically from the PKK, despite consistent structural and symbolic overlap.[4]

The defection of Talal Silo in late 2017 further revealed the depth of these connections. Silo, a Turkmen and former Syrian Army officer, served as the Arab public face of the SDF until his departure to opposition-held territory. His post-defection testimonies detailed the tightly controlled nature of the organization, its lack of true Arab representation, and the direct role of PKK commanders in all critical decisions.[5] Similarly, Nowruz Ahmed, a high-ranking military commander and veteran of the YPJ (Women's Protection Units), received her training in Qandil and remains integral to field operations.

Organizationally, the SDF remains linked to the PKK through training programs, ideological indoctrination, and command structures. Öcalan's portraits adorn offices and training camps across northeastern Syria, while his writings are integrated into military curricula and civil

[3] Charles Lister, *Profiling the Syrian Democratic Forces*, Middle East Institute, 2017.

[4] Jusoor Center, *The Leadership Structure of the SDF and Its Impact on Syria's Future*, 2021.

[5] Syrian Network for Human Rights, *Defectors' Testimonies on the SDF*, 2020.

administration frameworks.[6] Reports by U.S. intelligence and the Department of Defense have acknowledged these links, but they have been largely downplayed for the sake of maintaining operational alliances in the campaign against ISIS.

This dual identity—of being a local military actor and a proxy of a transnational militant organization—has placed the SDF at the center of regional tension. Türkiye's repeated military incursions into Syrian territory, most notably Operations Euphrates Shield (2016), Olive Branch (2018), and Peace Spring (2019), were largely driven by its goal of dismantling what it views as a PKK-controlled corridor on its southern border. These operations resulted in the loss of strategic territory for the SDF and intensified its reliance on U.S. military support and Russian mediation.

Inside Syria, the SDF's Arab-Kurdish tensions have grown increasingly volatile. In provinces like Deir Ezzor and Raqqa—overwhelmingly Arab in population—tribal leaders have accused the SDF of monopolizing governance, exploiting local resources, and forcibly conscripting youth. Protests and armed clashes in 2023–2024 underscored the fragility of the SDF's control and the limits of its legitimacy among non-Kurdish communities.[7] These grievances are compounded by human rights violations reported by organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Arbitrary arrests, forced displacement, the use of child soldiers, and suppression of civil society have all been documented, undermining the SDF's image as a progressive alternative to the Assad regime or extremist groups.

Adding to this complex picture is the U.S. role in shaping, sustaining, and legitimizing the SDF. Washington's decision to arm and train the group was driven by pragmatic battlefield concerns, particularly the need to confront ISIS without committing large numbers of American troops. However, the long-term consequences of this alliance—including alienating Türkiye, emboldening PKK influence in Syria, and creating a

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[6] U.S. Department of Defense Briefings on SDF/PKK Affiliation, 2018–2020.

[7] Amnesty International, *We Had Nowhere Else to Go: Forced Displacement in Northern Syria*, 2015.

quasi-state entity with fragile internal cohesion—have sparked growing debate within U.S. policy circles and among NATO partners.

Over two decades of development—from the PYD's foundation in 2003 to the SDF's rise to power in 2015 and its consolidation through the war on ISIS—the PKK's imprint on Syria's northeast has remained unmistakable. While the SDF has offered temporary stability and military effectiveness in certain areas, its structural exclusion of Arab voices, ideological rigidity, and controversial foreign alliances continue to alienate large segments of Syrian society.

As of 2024, the SDF remains a dominant force in northeastern Syria, but one that is increasingly viewed not as a partner in national reconstruction but as a parallel authority with foreign backing and sectarian overtones. Its legitimacy is further eroded by unresolved political grievances, systemic abuses, and the enduring symbolism of Öcalan's ideology in regions that were never part of the Kurdish nationalist struggle.

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Part XIII

The Idlib Experience and the Liberated Areas

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Idlib and the Experiment in Rebel Governance

Idlib, a largely rural province in northwestern Syria bordering Türkiye, has stood as both a beacon of revolutionary resilience and a mirror reflecting the internal contradictions of the Syrian uprising. Before 2011, Idlib was home to approximately 1.5 million residents—predominantly Sunni Muslims rooted in conservative tribal and religious traditions. Long neglected by the Baathist regime, its fertile lands and tight-knit communities fostered a strong local identity shaped by nationalistic sentiment and religious education. Even under Hafez al-Assad's rule, the region had displayed signs of political unrest, which later made it fertile ground for mass mobilization once the revolution broke out.

From the earliest weeks of the uprising, Idlib's towns—Saraqib, Maarrat al-Numan, Kafranbel, Jisr al-Shughur—became vibrant centers of protest. Kafranbel, in particular, achieved international recognition through its creative and sharp banners, which encapsulated the spirit of Syria's revolution. As peaceful demonstrations gradually gave way to armed resistance after 2012, Idlib quickly emerged as a strategic stronghold for the opposition. Rebel groups such as Ahrar al-Sham, Suqour al-Sham, and the Farouq Battalions spearheaded operations that liberated much of the province's southern and western countryside.

The turning point came in March 2015, when the Army of Conquest (Jaish al-Fath)—a powerful coalition that included Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham—captured the provincial capital from regime forces. The fall of Idlib city marked one of the most significant territorial victories for the opposition, invigorating revolutionary aspirations and briefly

raising hopes of establishing a sustainable alternative to Assad's authoritarian rule.[1]

In the years that followed, Idlib would be transformed into a final sanctuary for the Syrian revolution. As the Assad regime and its allies implemented brutal siege-and-surrender campaigns across opposition-held areas—including Darayya, Aleppo, eastern Ghouta, and northern Homs—tens of thousands of civilians and fighters were forcibly displaced and relocated to Idlib.[2] By 2018, the province's population had swelled to more than 3.5 million, making it one of the most densely populated regions in Syria. This influx strained local infrastructure and aid systems but also infused the region with renewed energy, talent, and organizational capacity. Activists, doctors, teachers, and relief workers who had been evacuated from other fronts began to rebuild a new revolutionary life in exile.

Grassroots efforts to establish civil governance flourished. Dozens of local councils emerged with support from international donors and NGOs, seeking to provide basic services and maintain a semblance of civilian life. These local structures, though often underfunded and fragmented, represented a bold experiment in bottom-up governance, aiming to prove that Syrians could manage their own affairs in the absence of both Assad and Islamist hegemony.[3]

However, this vision soon collided with the ambitions of armed factions, especially Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), formerly Jabhat al-Nusra. In July 2017, HTS expelled rival factions from Idlib city and quickly moved to dominate the rest of the province. Under the leadership of Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, HTS established the "Salvation Government" as a civilian front to administer the region. While this entity did succeed in maintaining security and some public services, it operated firmly under the control of HTS's military command.[4]

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[1] Ahmad Aba Zeid, *HTS's Rise to Power: From Nusra to Statehood*, Omran Center, 2018.

[2] Hazem Nahar, *Idlib and the Political Future of Liberated Syria*, Jusoor Center, 2020.

[3] Enab Baladi, field reports and analysis on Idlib, 2015–2023.

[4] Charles Lister, *Profiling HTS and the Future of Idlib*, Middle East Institute, 2021.

Independent local councils were sidelined or dissolved, dissenting voices silenced, and ideological conformity increasingly enforced.

The rise of HTS sparked deep polarization. On the one hand, some residents and civil society actors acknowledged a degree of stability under HTS rule, especially compared to the chaos wrought by inter-factional fighting. On the other hand, many Syrians viewed the group's monopolization of power, arrests of journalists and activists, and taxation of humanitarian aid as a betrayal of the revolution's democratic and pluralistic aspirations.[5] Jolani's transformation—from a turbaned jihadist once aligned with al-Qaeda to a suit-clad leader giving interviews to Western media—only intensified this divide. While he presented himself as a pragmatic leader capable of governing and securing Idlib against extremist threats, many suspected the rebranding was a tactical move aimed at avoiding foreign intervention and securing international legitimacy.

Behind the scenes, Türkiye played a pivotal role in shaping Idlib's trajectory. Beginning in 2017, Turkish forces established a network of military observation posts across the province, ostensibly to monitor ceasefires negotiated with Russia. After the Assad regime launched a major offensive in early 2020 that displaced nearly a million civilians, Turkish intervention—including air and artillery strikes—halted the regime's advance and led to the March 2020 ceasefire agreement.[6] Since then, Türkiye has maintained a military presence and served as a de facto guarantor of Idlib's relative stability.

Yet, Turkish involvement has also raised questions. While it has protected the province from complete collapse, it has also asserted indirect control over its political and security landscape. Türkiye backs several opposition factions and has coordinated—sometimes tacitly—with HTS to manage checkpoints, civil administration, and the flow of aid. For many Syrians, this has created a delicate balance: Türkiye is both protector and gatekeeper, shielding the revolution's last bastion while limiting its autonomy.

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[5] Human Rights Watch, *Syria: Abuses by HTS in Idlib*, 2020.

[6] Aron Lund, *Who's Who in Idlib*, The Century Foundation, 2019.

The humanitarian situation in Idlib remains dire. Though the 2020 ceasefire reduced the scale of violence, periodic airstrikes—especially on hospitals, schools, and marketplaces—have continued. Access to aid is heavily politicized, with Russia repeatedly pressuring the UN to restrict cross-border operations. Nevertheless, international organizations and Syrian NGOs have managed to sustain vital assistance to millions, despite immense logistical and funding challenges.[7]

Amid this complexity, the population of Idlib continues to live in a state of suspended hope. Some view HTS as a necessary evil in the absence of stronger alternatives; others see it as yet another authoritarian power ruling over them in revolutionary guise. The vibrant civil society that once characterized Idlib's liberated areas has been weakened but not extinguished. Activists still organize community events, teachers reopen schools in tents, and medics continue to serve war-torn communities under constant pressure.

Ultimately, Idlib stands as a paradox: it is both a refuge and a prison, a liberated zone and a militarized enclave, a symbol of what the revolution achieved and what it failed to sustain. Its fate remains deeply entwined with broader geopolitical calculations, but its people continue to resist erasure—by the regime, by extremist actors, or by the indifference of the world.

The challenge ahead lies in reclaiming the initial spirit of the uprising—dignity, freedom, and self-determination—and channeling it into a new political vision that transcends both Baathist authoritarianism and theocratic rule. If such a vision can take root in Idlib, it may yet serve as a cornerstone for rebuilding a free and democratic Syria.

[7] UN OCHA, *Reports on Humanitarian Conditions in Northwest Syria*, 2016–2023.

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The Salvation Government in Idlib: Governance Under HTS Authority

In November 2017, following a sweeping consolidation of power by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria's northwestern province of Idlib, a new administrative body was born: the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG). It emerged in the aftermath of HTS's decisive defeat of rival factions—most notably Ahrar al-Sham—and was intended to present a civilian face for an area increasingly dominated by a militant group with roots in global jihadist networks. The creation of the SSG marked a shift in strategy by HTS leader Ahmad al-Sharaa (Abu Muhammad al-Jolani), who now sought to replace open revolutionary anarchy with structured governance, not merely for practical reasons, but to project an image of legitimacy to both the local population and the international community.[1]

Publicly, HTS claimed that the Salvation Government operated independently, chosen by a Shura council through a bottom-up process that reflected the will of local communities. In reality, however, the reins of power remained firmly in the hands of HTS's military and ideological leadership. While the SSG operated ministries in areas such as health, education, economy, justice, and interior affairs, it was widely understood that key decisions were subject to approval by HTS's Shura and Military Councils.[2] Any illusion of autonomy was quickly dispelled by field reports and insider testimonies, which indicated that the SSG

[1] Ahmad Aba Zeid, *The Takeover of Idlib: How Nusra Became a Ruling Authority*, Omran Center, 2018.

[2] Aron Lund, *Governing Idlib: The Politics of HTS and the Salvation Government*, The Century Foundation, 2020.

functioned more as a bureaucratic arm of HTS rather than an independent civilian authority.[3]

The structure of the Salvation Government mirrored that of formal governments. Ministries were staffed with technocrats and Islamic jurists, court systems were based on a hybrid of Sharia law and revolutionary precedents, and various public services were launched—from vehicle registrations and real estate documentation to reopening schools and hospitals. Electricity and water networks were partially restored in some towns, and efforts were made to regulate prices and manage waste. The government also coordinated vaccination campaigns and supervised humanitarian efforts across refugee camps and urban centers.[4]

Yet these administrative accomplishments were overshadowed by a deeper tension: the question of legitimacy. There were no elections, no independent municipal councils, and no credible checks on the executive authority of HTS. The political process, to the extent that one existed, was directed from the top down, with figures close to HTS making key appointments. Independent civil society organizations, journalists, and activists who had previously animated the revolutionary spirit in Idlib now found themselves hemmed in by surveillance, arbitrary arrests, and a climate of fear.[5] A number of NGOs either ceased operations or relocated due to the stifling conditions imposed by the HTS-SSG apparatus.

Popular perceptions of the Salvation Government were mixed. Some welcomed the return of basic services and a semblance of order after years of war and factional chaos. Others regarded the SSG as an authoritarian regime cloaked in Islamist rhetoric, replicating the very same mechanisms of repression once used by the Assad regime. Taxes and fees were imposed across markets, checkpoints, and service sectors—often without transparency or oversight. Residents frequently

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[3] Al-Modon, Investigative Reports on HTS Control and Government Structure.

[4] Enab Baladi, "How the Salvation Government Administers Services in Idlib," field reports, 2018–2022.

[5] Human Rights Watch, *Syria: Abuses by HTS in Idlib*, 2020.

complained about financial burdens, especially given the widespread poverty and unemployment in the region.

The contrast between the SSG and the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), operating in Turkish-controlled zones such as Afrin and Jarablus, also revealed divergent governance models. The SIG, though criticized for inefficiencies and Turkish dependency, engaged more openly with international donors and opposition institutions. It was recognized by the Syrian Opposition Coalition and allowed a degree of pluralism. In contrast, the SSG remained politically isolated, with no formal international recognition. Türkiye maintained only indirect relations with it, primarily through humanitarian coordination and security understandings along the border.

Human rights groups and international observers have repeatedly sounded alarms about conditions under SSG rule. Reports from Human Rights Watch, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), and the United Nations have documented incidents of media censorship, arbitrary detention, suppression of peaceful protest, and the closure of independent institutions.[6] Accusations of targeting activists, confiscating property, and imposing ideological conformity in educational curricula have further undermined the SSG's image as a legitimate authority.

Despite these challenges, HTS has not abandoned its pursuit of rebranding. Jolani, once a prominent face of al-Qaeda in Syria, has taken to wearing Western suits, giving interviews to foreign journalists, and positioning himself as a responsible leader focused on governance, security, and local stability. These efforts, part of a broader rebranding strategy, have been aimed at sidestepping international terrorist designations and preserving Idlib from full-scale military confrontation with the regime or Russia.[7]

The future of the Salvation Government remains uncertain. The region's fate depends heavily on Türkiye's shifting policies, the endurance of HTS's internal cohesion, and the prospects for a political settlement in Syria. While the SSG has achieved modest administrative

[6] Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), Annual Reports, 2019–2023.

[7] Charles Lister, *Profiling HTS and the Future of Idlib*, Middle East Institute, 2021.

functionality in some areas, its deep entanglement with an armed group classified internationally as a terrorist organization continues to cast a long shadow. For many Syrians, particularly those who endured years of repression under the Assad regime, the SSG represents not a revolutionary alternative, but a continuation of authoritarian rule—merely under new colors.

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Civil Administration in the Liberated Areas: From Hope to Hardship

When large parts of Syria fell outside regime control during the revolutionary wave of 2012 and 2013, a new and unprecedented experiment began to take shape. For the first time in modern Syrian history, ordinary citizens took the reins of civil governance, determined to fill the void left by the collapsed state and to provide an alternative to the Assad regime's brutal authoritarianism. In towns and cities across the country—from Aleppo's countryside to Idlib, Daraa, and Eastern Ghouta—grassroots efforts gave birth to local councils, the first building blocks of self-rule in opposition-held Syria.

These councils emerged not from political parties or external mandates but from within the fabric of society itself. Teachers, engineers, doctors, lawyers, farmers, and former municipal employees came together to form administrative bodies that aimed to provide essential services, restore order, and articulate a vision for a new Syria. In many cases, these individuals were elected by popular vote or chosen through local consensus, signaling a shift from decades of centralized state control to decentralized, community-driven governance. Their efforts embodied the revolutionary slogan: *"The people want to build a new system."*

Despite limited experience in public administration and scarce financial resources, many councils succeeded in launching vital initiatives that met immediate community needs. Roads and schools were repaired, electricity and water were restored using alternative means, and hospitals and clinics were reopened—often with makeshift supplies and volunteer staff. These were not mere acts of survival, but defiant expressions of hope and autonomy. International support, though inconsistent, played a partial role in sustaining this fragile infrastructure. Aid came from

humanitarian organizations and friendly governments, including Türkiye, the United States, and several European countries such as Germany. However, this support was rarely strategic or long-term, often tied to short project cycles or influenced by geopolitical calculations.[1]

Some local councils achieved notable success despite operating under siege and bombardment. The Darayya Local Council, for instance, managed to govern the besieged city for years, organizing everything from underground tunnel networks for movement and supplies, to urban agriculture initiatives that allowed residents to grow food amid the ruins.[2] In Aleppo and Idlib, councils revived municipal services and even established civil Sharia courts to settle disputes, stepping into judicial functions in the absence of a functioning legal system.[3] In southern Syria, councils in Daraa's countryside provided a platform for dozens of civil society initiatives, from schools to relief centers, serving tens of thousands of residents despite the surrounding chaos.[4]

However, this promising experiment was soon besieged—not only by barrel bombs and airstrikes from the Assad regime and its Russian allies but also by the deep structural and political challenges that came with war. Civil infrastructure, including council offices, schools, and hospitals, became prime targets for regime attacks. Internationally, the councils never received formal recognition. The United Nations and major diplomatic actors continued to treat the Assad regime as the sole legitimate authority, even as it slaughtered civilians and lost control of vast areas. This lack of legitimacy deprived the councils of crucial resources, legal protections, and diplomatic avenues.[5]

Internally, they faced mounting challenges from within the revolution's own ranks. Council members operated in an atmosphere of

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[1] Hazem Nahar, *Local Councils in Syria: A Civilian Experience in Wartime*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2016.

[2] Rami Nakleh, "Reflections on the Local Councils," *al-Jumhuriya*, 2015.

[3] Omran Center for Strategic Studies, *Local Administration in Syria: Realities and Challenges*, 2018.

[4] Yassin al-Sweih, *Civil Administration in Liberated Areas: Realities and Trajectories*, Syrian Network for Human Rights, 2017.

[5] International Crisis Group, *Steps Toward Stabilization in Syria's Rebel Areas*, 2016.

constant insecurity. Assassinations, arbitrary arrests, and intimidation—sometimes carried out by regime agents, other times by rival opposition factions or extremist groups—took a heavy toll. The proliferation of armed groups, each with its own agenda and territorial ambitions, often undermined the councils' authority. In many areas, factions would challenge or co-opt council decisions, control access to funds, or impose their own court systems and legal codes, creating overlapping and conflicting structures of governance.[6] Coordination between councils was inconsistent, and disputes between civil and military actors over authority and jurisdiction became routine.

This erosion of independence became most acute with the rise of jihadist factions, especially Jabhat al-Nusra (later Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham). In Idlib and surrounding regions, local councils were gradually brought under the control of the Salvation Government, HTS's administrative front. This shift marked a turning point: the space for civilian-led governance shrank dramatically, and the revolutionary legitimacy of the councils was replaced with ideological and military coercion.[7] Instead of accountable, community-based administration, many areas saw the emergence of faction-imposed governance models that bore little resemblance to the grassroots councils of 2012.

Even in areas less affected by extremist influence, such as Daraa or Eastern Ghouta, local councils struggled with military interference. Armed groups began to exert control over funding channels, council appointments, and decision-making processes, often sidelining competent administrators in favor of loyalists. This politicization of governance further alienated local communities and weakened the councils' credibility.

Following major regime advances and mass displacements—particularly after the fall of Aleppo in 2016 and Eastern Ghouta in 2018—tens of thousands of Syrians fled to the north, where a new administrative experiment took root. In regions under Turkish

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[6] Atlantic Council, *The Future of Governance in Syrian Opposition Areas*, 2019.

[7] Aron Lund, *Governing Idlib: The Politics of HTS and the Salvation Government*, The Century Foundation, 2020.

influence—namely the Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring zones—new councils were established with logistical and institutional backing from Turkish provincial authorities in Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, and Hatay. These areas adopted more formalized governance structures, integrated with Turkish systems of service delivery, including police training, education, and healthcare.[8]

While this model offered greater stability and continuity in public services, it was not without controversy. Many locals felt that sovereignty was being compromised, as Turkish flags flew over public buildings and Turkish curricula were introduced into schools. Moreover, councils continued to face major constraints: funding remained limited; jurisdictional overlap between Turkish agencies and local bodies caused bureaucratic confusion; and the absence of a unified national political vision for post-Assad Syria hindered coordination between liberated areas.

Despite all these challenges, the civil administration project remains one of the most important and inspiring aspects of the Syrian revolution. It represents a living testament to the Syrian people's capacity for self-governance, civic responsibility, and democratic aspiration. In the face of brutal repression, occupation, and betrayal, ordinary citizens built a vision of a different Syria—one that placed dignity, participation, and accountability at the heart of governance.

Today, the survival and evolution of this model should be seen not merely as a local administrative question, but as a pillar of any future Syrian national project. Protecting these gains, learning from their weaknesses, and building upon their strengths will be essential for ensuring that the revolution's political and moral legacy endures beyond the battlefield.

[8] Syrian Center for Policy Research, *Fragmentation and Resilience in Syria*, 2018.

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Factional Infighting in Idlib: From Armed Unity to Power Struggles

When opposition forces gained control of much of Idlib province in 2012—and later seized the provincial capital in March 2015—there was a brief but powerful sense that the region might become the heart of a new, liberated Syria. The area's military, demographic, and geographic centrality gave it strategic weight, and its relative distance from major regime strongholds allowed for a unique experiment in revolutionary governance and armed coordination. Yet beneath the surface of this hopeful moment lay unresolved ideological divisions, competing agendas, and growing distrust among the armed factions that had fought together to expel regime forces. These tensions would soon boil over into a protracted internal conflict that reshaped the entire trajectory of the revolution in the north.

The early years of opposition control in Idlib were marked by a fragile coexistence among a mosaic of armed groups. These included Ahrar al-Sham—a powerful Salafi movement with revolutionary-nationalist leanings; Jabhat al-Nusra, then the official Syrian branch of al-Qaeda; and a range of Free Syrian Army (FSA) formations such as Faylaq al-Sham, Division 13, and the Free Idlib Army. While these groups occasionally coordinated in battles or local governance, their ideological differences and rival ambitions prevented the emergence of a unified front. Some factions sought a decentralized, post-Assad Syria aligned with Turkish or Western interests, while others envisioned a transnational jihadist emirate that transcended the borders of the modern nation-state.[1]

[1] Charles Lister, *The Fragmentation of Syria's Rebels and the Rise of HTS*, Middle East Institute, 2020.

The competition for influence over territory, resources, and public legitimacy became increasingly visible as military victories stalled. Each faction cultivated its own judiciary, civil administration, and media networks. While the language of unity persisted in revolutionary rhetoric, on the ground, there was growing fragmentation—a fault line that would soon fracture the opposition movement in Idlib.

The turning point came in 2017, when Jabhat al-Nusra rebranded itself as *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS) and formally severed ties with al-Qaeda. Far from representing a moderation of the group's aims, the rebranding marked the beginning of a strategic consolidation campaign.[2] HTS launched an aggressive military offensive against rival groups under the pretext of unifying the armed effort. Its most significant confrontation came in July 2017, when it violently clashed with Ahrar al-Sham in and around Idlib city, eventually forcing Ahrar to withdraw to the western countryside. This was not an isolated incident. Over the next two years, HTS systematically dismantled or absorbed smaller factions, including FSA-aligned groups like Division 13 and the Free Idlib Army.[3] Even powerful outfits like Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki, once dominant in Aleppo's countryside, were pushed out or disbanded.

By 2018, HTS began pressuring factions that refused to align with its vision or refused to join the *Salvation Government*, its civilian administrative arm. Clashes erupted across various regions as HTS expanded its reach under the banner of "unifying arms." The campaign also extended into ideological territory. Within the jihadist sphere, dissent brewed. Groups like Hurras al-Din split from HTS, rejecting its strategic pivot away from global jihad and accusing it of ideological betrayal.[4] Armed confrontations ensued, particularly in areas west of Idlib and around Jisr al-Shughur. HTS responded with calculated force—arresting or assassinating Hurras leaders and dismantling their operational infrastructure.

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[2] Aron Lund, *Syria's Rebel Alliances and HTS's Consolidation*, Carnegie Middle East Center, 2019.

[3] Ahmad Aba Zeid, *The Collapse of the Factions in Idlib*, Omran Center, 2019.

[4] International Crisis Group, *The Perilous Politics of HTS in Idlib*, 2021.

The cumulative effect of these campaigns was not just military supremacy but also the suppression of political and civil diversity in Idlib. As HTS tightened its grip, it imposed restrictions on civil society actors, independent media, and even religious figures who voiced dissent. Activists who had once celebrated the revolution's pluralistic promise now found themselves surveilled, detained, or driven into exile.[5] Popular protests occasionally erupted—calling for pluralism, the release of detainees, or the preservation of local councils—but they were often suppressed or ignored. Nevertheless, these acts of civic resistance, however limited, signaled that the revolutionary spirit had not been entirely extinguished.

Even within HTS's own ranks, cracks began to appear. Senior figures such as Abu Maria al-Qahtani voiced criticism of the group's direction, especially its authoritarian tactics and lack of strategic clarity. Debates arose between those advocating for pragmatic engagement with regional powers, especially Türkiye, and others who remained committed to the ideals of global jihad. While HTS leadership worked to maintain internal cohesion, several defections and expulsions occurred, reflecting deeper ideological and strategic disagreements.

Türkiye's role in this evolving landscape was complex and multifaceted. Ankara established observation posts in Idlib and brokered de-escalation deals with Russia to prevent a regime advance.[6] Yet it stopped short of directly challenging HTS's military dominance. Instead, Türkiye supported parallel structures such as the *National Liberation Front* (NLF), a coalition of armed factions more aligned with Turkish interests. While NLF factions occasionally resisted HTS encroachment, many were ultimately absorbed or neutralized. Türkiye's cautious approach aimed to preserve stability near its borders and prevent a humanitarian crisis, even if it meant tolerating HTS's dominance—so long as it did not provoke international intervention or regional instability.

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[5] Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, *Idlib Under HTS: From Factions to Centralized Rule*, 2022.

[6] UN OCHA, Reports on Armed Group Dynamics in Northwest Syria, 2017–2023.

HTS, for its part, sought to consolidate its rule not only through armed force but also via institutional penetration. The establishment of the *Salvation Government* enabled the group to project an image of civilian governance.[7] Through control over religious courts, dawa institutions, and media outlets, HTS presented itself as a rational administrative actor, capable of managing public services, humanitarian aid, and dispute resolution. This dual-track strategy—military coercion coupled with bureaucratic expansion—allowed HTS to entrench itself deeply into Idlib's social and political fabric.

By 2024, the map of opposition Idlib had been radically redrawn. HTS controlled most of the territory, having neutralized or absorbed rivals. The once-diverse array of armed groups had narrowed to a few factions, with many smaller groups either dissolving, integrating into HTS's apparatus, or joining the Turkish-backed NLF in marginal roles. The result was relative calm on the surface but at the cost of political plurality, revolutionary ideals, and civil liberties. The region's once-vibrant civic landscape had been hollowed out, replaced by an authoritarian order with limited space for dissent or alternative visions.

Looking ahead, the future of Idlib's armed and political landscape remains deeply uncertain. While some analysts speculate about HTS rebranding yet again to integrate into a broader political solution for Syria, others warn of renewed infighting—whether triggered by internal dissent, external military pressure, or shifts in Turkish policy. There is also the possibility of slow political normalization under Turkish influence, with HTS adapting its rhetoric and tactics to gain a measure of international legitimacy. However, the deeper challenge lies in reconciling the authoritarian reality on the ground with the revolutionary ideals that initially drove the Syrian uprising.

Monopoly at the Expense of Pluralism

Idlib's trajectory from revolutionary diversity to authoritarian consolidation offers a sobering case study in the unintended consequences of militarized governance. What began as a hopeful mosaic

[7] Jusoor Center for Studies, *HTS and Other Factions in Northern Syria*, 2021.

of armed and civil actors pursuing liberation from dictatorship has morphed into a tightly controlled territory under the hegemony of one dominant faction. While this has produced relative stability in the short term, it has done so by stifling pluralism, eroding civil freedoms, and alienating much of the population that once fought for change. Idlib today stands as both a symbol of resilience and a cautionary tale—a revolutionary enclave where the dream of freedom survives, but barely.

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HTS: From Arms to Authority

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), one of the most controversial and adaptive actors in Syria's armed opposition landscape, is the product of a decade-long transformation that began with the establishment of Jabhat al-Nusra in early 2012. Originally conceived as the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra entered the battlefield during the early days of the revolution with the rhetoric of global jihad and the mission of establishing an Islamic emirate. Its leadership, under Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, combined military prowess with a strategic ability to embed within local dynamics—developing not only armed formations but also religious outreach programs (*da'wa*), humanitarian initiatives, and an exclusionary, often ruthless, stance toward rival groups.[1]

From the outset, al-Nusra sought more than just battlefield victories. It aimed to shape the ideological trajectory of the revolution itself. While other factions framed their struggle in nationalist or revolutionary terms, al-Nusra's lexicon was steeped in doctrinal purity, Islamic jurisprudence, and eschatological ambition. Yet this commitment to al-Qaeda's globalist vision quickly brought it into tension with both local Syrian communities and international powers. The growing divergence between Jolani's leadership and al-Qaeda's central command, particularly under Ayman al-Zawahiri, came to a head by mid-2016, with public disputes over strategy and alignment. In July of that year, Jabhat al-Nusra announced its formal disengagement from al-Qaeda and rebranded as Jabhat Fath al-Sham, soon followed by its absorption into a new coalition—Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.[2]

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[1] Charles Lister, *Profiling HTS: Evolution of a Jihadi Power*, Middle East Institute, 2021.

[2] Aron Lund, *A New Leader for a New HTS?*, The Century Foundation, 2020.

This move, while presented as a break with global jihad, was in reality a strategic recalibration. Jolani recognized the shifting tides: the international community's intensifying crackdown on jihadist movements, the military collapse of ISIS, and the dwindling space for armed Islamist groups to operate freely. HTS sought to reframe its image—not as an offshoot of al-Qaeda, but as a Syrian movement invested in local governance, stability, and the protection of Sunni civilians. Over time, this pivot would become more pronounced, transforming the group's operational focus from battlefield dominance to political relevance.[3]

Central to this metamorphosis was the evolution of Abu Muhammad al-Jolani himself. From a shadowy warlord issuing communiqués from the battlefield, Jolani emerged as a polished media figure—clean-shaven, well-dressed, and articulate. His interviews with Al Jazeera and France 24 shocked audiences who had once associated him with the hardline rhetoric of jihad.[4] Instead of calls for global Islamic revolution, he now spoke of civil administration, transitional governance, and restoring order in liberated areas. Analysts debated whether this was genuine ideological evolution or a calculated performance aimed at securing survival and relevance in a rapidly changing geopolitical environment.[5]

Whether sincere or tactical, Jolani's transformation found resonance with parts of the war-weary population in northwest Syria. After years of factional conflict, regime bombardment, and failed leadership among the opposition, many locals were drawn to HTS's ability to enforce security, stabilize markets, and deliver public services.[6] By 2024, with the fall of the Assad regime and the subsequent power vacuum in Damascus, Jolani positioned himself not merely as a local emir but as a national figure—capable of leading Syria's transition out of chaos. His ascent to the

[3] Jusoor Center for Studies, *HTS: From Jihad to Politics*, 2021.

[4] Interviews with al-Jolani: Al Jazeera Mubasher (2021), France 24 Arabic (2022).

[5] Carnegie Middle East Center, *HTS and the Paradox of Idlib Governance*, 2021.

[6] Atlantic Council, *Syria's Transitional Dynamics After Assad*, 2025.

presidency in the new Syrian political order marked a dramatic, and for many, unthinkable, reversal of roles.[7]

HTS's rise to dominance in northern Syria was marked by a methodical campaign of military consolidation between 2017 and 2019. Rival factions—particularly Ahrar al-Sham and the National Liberation Front (NLF)—were either expelled from key cities, coerced into submission, or marginalized through legal and political mechanisms. FSA-aligned brigades such as Division 13 and the Free Idlib Army were dissolved, often through show trials or orchestrated disarmament deals. These operations culminated in the establishment of the *Salvation Government*, a civilian shell through which HTS extended its authority across administrative, judicial, and economic sectors.[8]

A critical tool in HTS's power apparatus has been its internal security branch, *al-Amn al-ʿAmm* (General Security), tasked with maintaining order but also feared for its extensive surveillance, arbitrary detention, and opaque judicial processes. While HTS branded itself as a guardian of stability and justice, critics accused it of running a de facto police state. Journalists, civil society actors, and religious scholars who expressed dissent were subject to arrest or exile.[9] Prominent figures such as Taher al-Omar and Fares al-Shami were detained, and independent media was systematically curtailed. NGOs were either banned or pressured to coordinate with HTS's networks.[10]

Yet beginning in 2022, the group began softening its posture. Facing pressure from local communities and recognizing the necessity of legitimacy in the post-Assad landscape, HTS introduced a series of reforms. It loosened restrictions on NGOs, permitted limited space for independent journalism, and restructured its courts for greater transparency.[11] Municipal elections were allowed in select areas, and

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[7] Syrian Future Forum, *Jolani's Rise and Post-Assad Leadership*, 2025.

[8] International Crisis Group, *Squaring the Circles in Syria's Northwest*, Report No. 213, 2020.

[9] Harmoon Center, *Security and Power Structures in HTS Territory*, 2022.

[10] Syrian Dialogue Center, *The Salvation Government: Evaluating the Experience*, 2022.

[11] Sharq Institute, *Transformations of the Islamic Project in Northern Syria*, 2020.

HTS-backed technocrats increasingly took charge of service delivery, distancing themselves from overt ideological governance. The group presented these shifts as signs of maturity—a claim that gained traction as public satisfaction grew in some areas previously plagued by lawlessness.[12]

HTS's regional entanglements, particularly with Türkiye, added further complexity to its trajectory. Though formally designated a terrorist group by Ankara, informal arrangements emerged. Türkiye and HTS coordinated on key issues: management of border crossings, taxation of trade, and deconfliction with rival armed groups. Humanitarian access was streamlined through shared mechanisms, and both parties had a vested interest in preventing further regime advances or Russian escalation. Russia, for its part, remained hostile to HTS's existence but calibrated its military pressure in order to maintain diplomatic channels with Türkiye. Western actors, however, remained unconvinced. The U.S., E.U., and U.N. refused to remove the terrorist designation, thereby excluding HTS from any formal negotiation frameworks or reconstruction channels.[13]

Alongside military and political consolidation, HTS invested heavily in rebranding its religious and media narratives. The movement's earlier slogans centered on martyrdom, divine victory, and global resistance. These gradually gave way to themes of justice, governance, and national unity. Messaging shifted from fiery sermons to polished videos, town hall meetings, and carefully curated interviews.[14] Slogans like "Protecting the Revolution" and "Justice for the Oppressed" replaced talk of the caliphate. These efforts were aimed not only at local populations but also at international observers, signaling HTS's ambition to be seen as a post-jihadist actor capable of responsible statecraft.[15]

The years between 2022 and 2024 were particularly critical in this regard. HTS expanded community outreach, launched anti-corruption

[12] Jusoor Center for Studies, *HTS and Civil Society*, 2023.

[13] International Crisis Group, *HTS, Turkey, and Regional Calculations*, 2022.

[14] Charles Lister, *Profiling HTS*, op. cit.

[15] Sharq Institute, op. cit.

drives, and encouraged new partnerships with civil society groups. While critics remained wary of the group's authoritarian past, the new discourse and tangible service improvements began to sway public opinion.[16] Municipal councils operated with greater autonomy, town hall forums were organized to solicit feedback, and even religious sermons began to reflect a more moderate tone. Jolani's leadership during this phase portrayed him not as a revolutionary purist, but as a transitional statesman navigating the ruins of war.[17]

Nevertheless, the project remains fragile. The lack of international recognition continues to limit HTS's access to funding, diplomatic support, and development partnerships. Internally, it must contend with the challenge of demobilizing fighters, reintegrating opposition elites, and maintaining unity among its ranks. The balance between Islamic legitimacy and inclusive governance also remains precarious. HTS's core base includes ideological purists who resist compromise, while newer allies advocate for broader coalitions and political reform. Meeting the expectations of a war-ravaged population—hungry for justice, employment, and dignity—will require not only continued transformation, but also transparency, humility, and a genuine commitment to national reconstruction.[18]

[16] Syrian Dialogue Center, op. cit.

[17] Al Jazeera and France 24 interviews, op. cit.

[18] Atlantic Council, op. cit.

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Part XIV

The Final Struggle and the Shift

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Mounting Economic Pressures on the Syrian Regime (2020–2024)

As Syria entered the third decade of the 21st century, the Assad regime found itself confronting not just military exhaustion and political isolation, but also a multifaceted economic collapse that penetrated every aspect of governance and daily life. From 2020 to 2024, the Syrian economy experienced its most severe downturn since the start of the conflict in 2011—an implosion driven by the compound effects of international sanctions, a rapidly depreciating currency, structural decay, and the erosion of external lifelines from Iran and Russia. More critically, these pressures signaled a deeper unraveling: the loss of the regime's capacity to maintain control through economic patronage and coercion, the very levers that had sustained its power for decades.

One of the most consequential blows came in the form of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, passed by the United States in June 2020. This legislation marked a new level of targeted economic warfare, focusing not only on the regime's leadership but also on its broader support network—banks, reconstruction firms, and foreign entities engaging with Damascus.[1] The act was especially effective in freezing external capital, discouraging Gulf states, European firms, and even private investors from pursuing post-war reconstruction contracts or economic ventures within regime-held areas. While the regime attempted to frame the sanctions as part of a Western siege, the reality was more complex: the Caesar Act did not generate Syria's economic collapse, but it deepened and prolonged it, denying the regime access to the very recovery tools it had once hoped to exploit.

[1] *International Crisis Group, Syria's Stalled State: Between Sanctions and Survival*, 2023.

Perhaps no indicator better illustrated this collapse than the catastrophic fall of the Syrian pound. Once relatively stable at 50 SYP to the U.S. dollar in 2010, the exchange rate spiraled out of control during this period, exceeding 15,000 SYP to the dollar by early 2024 on the black market.[2] This currency crash had devastating consequences. Public sector wages, already meager, became functionally worthless. A teacher or engineer earning the equivalent of $10–$15 a month could barely afford basic food staples. Inflation soared to historic levels, with prices of bread, cooking gas, fuel, and medicine multiplying several times over. Once again, the Syrian middle class—already battered by war—was hollowed out. The population turned increasingly to remittances from family members abroad, informal trade, or humanitarian aid to survive.

In a desperate attempt to offset the crisis, the Central Bank resorted to printing massive quantities of unbacked currency. But this only worsened inflation and eroded public trust. Even in core regime areas like Damascus and the coastal cities, the economic strain began to breed resentment. Markets became speculative zones where prices changed by the hour, and hoarding became widespread.[3] The regime's economic discourse—once centered on promises of "reconstruction" and "sovereignty"—gave way to empty slogans and harsh austerity.

Meanwhile, the foundations of external economic support also began to crack. Iran, facing its own internal economic and political turmoil exacerbated by U.S. sanctions and nationwide protests, began gradually reducing its cash and fuel transfers to Damascus. Tehran's focus shifted toward domestic stability and strategic priorities elsewhere, such as Iraq and Lebanon.[4] Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine further disrupted its capacity to sustain costly overseas entanglements. As Moscow was drawn into prolonged conflict and subjected to unprecedented Western sanctions, its ability to subsidize Syrian military operations and provide diplomatic cover weakened considerably. Although both countries maintained a presence in Syria, their tangible

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[2] *Syrian Economic Network*, currency and inflation data analysis (2023).

[3] *Jusoor Center for Studies*, *The Syrian Economy After the Caesar Act*, 2021.

[4] *World Bank Reports on Syria*, 2021–2023; see also *BBC Arabic* interviews with analysts.

support—particularly in fuel, subsidized wheat, and militia salaries—was dramatically scaled back, leaving the regime to fend for itself with dwindling resources.

Inside Syria, economic governance became increasingly privatized and predatory. The formal state apparatus deteriorated under the weight of mismanagement, brain drain, and infrastructural decay. Agriculture withered due to fertilizer shortages, irrigation breakdown, and security risks. Industry—once a major contributor to Syria's GDP—collapsed almost entirely due to power outages, destroyed factories, and international isolation.[5] Health and education services, already depleted by years of war, deteriorated further as doctors, engineers, and teachers emigrated in search of dignity and livelihoods.

In this vacuum, an alternative economic system thrived: a hybrid of mafia networks, war profiteers, and regime cronies. Figures like Samer Foz, Rami Makhlouf (before his fall from grace), and Mohannad al-Dabbagh came to dominate monopolies in real estate, trade, and import contracts. Asma al-Assad, the president's wife, expanded her influence through economic initiatives cloaked in philanthropic language but deeply entwined with regime survival.[6] The result was the emergence of a shadow economy—characterized by smuggling, currency manipulation, fuel theft, and systematic corruption—that enriched a narrow elite while leaving the vast majority of Syrians impoverished and disempowered.

This deterioration did not go unchallenged. By 2022 and 2023, civil unrest began to resurface across the country, particularly in marginalized regions that had remained under nominal regime control. In Sweida, the Druze-majority province, protests erupted over the cost of living, fuel shortages, and perceived regime neglect. Demonstrators revived slogans from the 2011 uprising, calling for freedom and the downfall of the regime. In Daraa, a province with a long history of defiance, protests

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[5] *Jusoor Center for Studies*, *The Syrian Economic Landscape in 2020*, December 2020.
[6] *Al-Modon* investigative report: "Asma al-Assad and the Shadow Networks," 2022.

took on both economic and political dimensions.[7] Strikes, roadblocks, and public acts of defiance grew bolder.

Even in Damascus, Latakia, and Hama, where regime control remained strongest, cracks appeared. Utility bills went unpaid. Youth refused military conscription. Crime networks flourished in the absence of law enforcement. There was a profound collapse in the social contract. State institutions, already weakened by war, were no longer feared nor trusted. The regime, unable to offer security, stability, or economic opportunity, turned increasingly to repression and intimidation, arresting traders accused of price gouging and threatening those who criticized the government on social media.

From 2020 to 2024, Syria was no longer simply a state at war—it became a shell of governance held together by fear, loyalist networks, and foreign calculation. The Assad regime's economic collapse was not merely a side effect of sanctions or war damage; it was the direct consequence of decades of extractive rule, elite capture, and systemic corruption, now laid bare in a country stripped of its economic lifelines. This period marked not only the breaking point of the regime's financial model but also the beginning of a profound transformation in how Syrians—both in regime and opposition areas—understood power, survival, and the cost of silence.

[7] *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, protests in Sweida and Daraa (2022–2023).

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Internal Defections Within State Institutions (2020–2024)

Between 2020 and 2024, the Syrian regime, long held together by a carefully constructed web of coercive institutions and personal loyalty, began to experience visible fractures within the very state structures that once guaranteed its survival. These were not the high-profile, spectacular military defections that marked the early years of the revolution, but rather slow, silent, and corrosive forms of institutional decay—resignations, withdrawals, and internal rebellions that hollowed out the state from within.

Syria's post-1970 political order had been built on the absolute centralization of power in the hands of the Assad family and its tightly controlled security apparatus. Ministries, intelligence branches, and military units functioned less as service-providing institutions and more as tools of regime preservation. However, by the early 2020s, this system began to buckle under the weight of economic collapse, elite fragmentation, and growing public discontent. The social contract that once offered security and minimal stability in exchange for loyalty and silence was unraveling, even in the regime's heartlands.

A major factor driving this institutional erosion was the economic crisis, which reached unprecedented depths during this period. The collapse of the Syrian pound, runaway inflation, and widespread shortages left state employees—both civilian and military—facing destitution. Public servants, unable to feed their families on salaries worth less than $20 a month, turned to survival strategies outside the law. Many abandoned their posts altogether, while others became active participants in the regime's growing shadow economy: bribery networks, black-market fuel sales, forged documentation, and security extortion schemes.

This degradation extended into all sectors. Government offices became hollowed-out shells, where administrative procedures were slowed to a crawl or halted entirely unless bribes were paid. The educational and health sectors saw an exodus of professionals—teachers, doctors, and administrators—who fled either to opposition-held areas, neighboring countries, or Europe. State institutions increasingly functioned in name only, while their real operations were overtaken by informal actors, militias, and war economy networks.[1]

Even more alarming for the regime was the slow disintegration of discipline within the military and security establishment. Once considered unshakable pillars of the regime's power, elite divisions such as the Republican Guard and the 4th Division—led by Maher al-Assad—began to show signs of fracture. Human rights organizations and opposition sources reported numerous cases of silent desertion and internal rebellion. In several instances, officers refused orders to suppress local protests or engage in violent crackdowns. Those suspected of insubordination were quietly removed, reassigned, or in some cases, assassinated.[2]

Two cases stood out during this period: the targeted killings of Colonel Ayman K. in Rural Damascus and Colonel Ammar S. in Deir Ezzor. Though the regime portrayed these events as isolated security incidents, insider accounts indicated that both men had expressed objections to orders involving civilian repression and had been under internal surveillance. Their deaths sent a chilling message across military ranks—but they also confirmed what many already suspected: that loyalty within the officer corps could no longer be taken for granted.[3]

Tensions within the ruling elite came to the surface in 2020, when a dramatic public confrontation unfolded between Bashar al-Assad and his cousin Rami Makhlouf, one of Syria's wealthiest businessmen and long-time financier of the regime. In a series of unprecedented video

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[1] Chatham House, *The Syrian State in Crisis: Elite Fragmentation and Institutional Decay*, 2022.

[2] Human Rights Watch, *Assad's Inner Circle and the Crumbling State*, 2021.

[3] Syrian Network for Human Rights, *Reports on Institutional Defections*, 2021–2023.

statements, Makhlouf accused regime figures of corruption, betrayal, and unjust asset seizures. The episode revealed deep divisions between the regime's security apparatus, dominated by Maher al-Assad, and its economic elite, many of whom had long seen Makhlouf as their patron.[4] The fallout from this affair sparked a wave of quiet mutinies within government ministries, where resentment toward the ruling family—especially Asma al-Assad's increasing control of the economy—was already brewing. Several mid-ranking officials and economic technocrats withdrew from public life, resigned from their posts, or relocated abroad.

Alongside these elite fractures, a steady trickle of defections and resignations began to emerge across Syria's diplomatic, educational, and administrative landscape. Over a five-year period, multiple diplomats resigned from their posts in European capitals—including embassies in Vienna, Stockholm, and Moscow—often seeking asylum in the process. University deans and faculty members at prominent institutions like Damascus University and Tishreen University resigned, citing political interference, ideological pressure, and intolerable working conditions. Officers from notorious intelligence branches—including Air Force Intelligence, Political Security, and the infamous Palestine Branch—also defected, escaping to Türkiye, northern Syria, or Iraqi Kurdistan.

While these developments received little or no coverage in regime media, they signaled a fundamental truth: the regime was bleeding from within. The pillars of governance that had once stood unshakable were quietly crumbling—not through grand military coups, but through daily acts of defiance, disengagement, and withdrawal. This slow exodus of professionals, technocrats, and insiders deeply undermined the regime's ability to function. Ministries became increasingly staffed by loyalists with little expertise, decisions were delayed or avoided due to fear of surveillance, and rival intelligence branches worked at cross-purposes, more concerned with protecting their turf than governing the state.[5]

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[4] Sharq Research Institute, *The Assad Inner Conflict: Reading the Rami Makhlouf Affair*, 2020.

[5] Carnegie Middle East Center (Aron Lund), *The Assad Regime After a Decade of War*, 2022.

In response, the regime attempted to restore control through reactive and improvised measures. Leadership within key security agencies was frequently reshuffled to suppress dissent and maintain discipline. Bashar al-Assad expanded coordination with Iranian-backed militias and accelerated the recruitment of loyalist paramilitary units, effectively creating a parallel "shadow army" to offset unreliable formal forces. But these efforts only deepened the state's dependence on informal networks, further weakening institutional cohesion.

What emerged by 2024 was no longer a functioning state, but a fragmented regime apparatus surviving on fear, patronage, and improvisation. Institutions once regarded as instruments of stability had become symbols of decay. Loyalty was no longer ideological but transactional, tied to economic gain or survival. Defections were no longer headline-grabbing events—they had become a routine part of the slow-motion collapse of the Syrian state. And as the revolutionary tide began to rise again, these internal fractures would play a crucial role in paving the way for the regime's dramatic fall.

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The Expansion of Popular and Armed Resistance (2020–2024)

Despite enduring over a decade of brutality, displacement, and international betrayal, the Syrian revolution never truly died. Though crushed in many areas and marginalized by global politics, its pulse continued—at times faint, at times defiant—until it surged back between 2020 and 2024 with renewed force. During this period, the resistance—both civil and armed—re-emerged, transformed, and expanded across key geographies. No longer centralized or reliant on the fractured opposition leadership abroad, this new wave of resistance was decentralized, locally driven, and strategically adaptive. It was, in many ways, a return to the revolution's original soul: a grassroots uprising driven by a shared desire to end tyranny.

In southern Syria, particularly in Suwayda and Daraa, the early signs of resurgence began with spontaneous protests sparked by economic collapse. What began as demonstrations over bread and fuel quickly evolved into bold denunciations of Assad's rule. In Suwayda, a region long known for its cautious neutrality and Druze-majority population, protests gained momentum without falling prey to immediate regime crackdowns. Shielded by sectarian complexity and internal elite dynamics, Suwayda became a center for sustained civil disobedience. Demonstrators revived the slogans of 2011, blending them with contemporary demands for justice and economic survival. Unlike earlier protests that were often crushed with tanks and snipers, Suwayda's uprising evolved into a persistent pressure campaign—an uncomfortable reminder for the regime that no province was truly pacified.[1]

[1] Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, *The Southern Movement: Resistance and Civil Defiance in Suwayda*, 2022.

Daraa, meanwhile—the cradle of the original revolution—took a more confrontational path. Between 2021 and 2023, local armed resistance cells intensified operations against regime forces. Guerrilla tactics, once dismissed as ineffective, proved highly successful in harassing security convoys, targeting collaborators, and disrupting military logistics. Armed ambushes, assassinations of local security figures, and nighttime raids forced the regime to engage in backchannel negotiations with tribal leaders.[2] Yet these attempts at co-optation failed to address the underlying anger. What had once been a fragile reconciliation zone after the regime's reentry in 2018 turned into a boiling cauldron of dissent. Daraa's resistance, both political and armed, became emblematic of the resilience of revolutionary will in Syria's south.[3]

In the vast central and eastern deserts of Syria—the Badiyah—the landscape of resistance took a different form. These remote regions, stretching from rural Homs to Deir Ezzor, had long been strategic corridors for smuggling, militia deployment, and regime logistics. The sparse population and difficult terrain made it challenging for Damascus to maintain a sustained presence. During this period, a mix of actors—tribal fighters, former FSA members, and even ex-ISIS combatants—began organizing localized resistance operations. These groups were united not by ideology but by a common goal: expel regime forces and foreign militias, particularly Iranian proxies, from their territories. Hit-and-run attacks, sabotage of arms depots, and disruption of fuel convoys became regular features of the desert insurgency.[4] In parallel, small-scale tribal uprisings challenged both the regime and its nominal allies, like the SDF, revealing the deep and unresolved grievances of communities long treated as buffer zones in Syria's war.[5]

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[2] Al-Modon and Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, reports on Daraa unrest and armed operations (2020–2024).

[3] International Crisis Group, *The New Syrian Resistance: Between Fragmentation and Strategic Adaptation*, 2023.

[4] Jusoor Center for Studies, *Insurgency in the Syrian Badiyah*, 2023.

[5] Carnegie Middle East Center, *Revolution Reborn: Popular Mobilization in Assad's Final Years*, 2025.

In the northwest, resistance took on yet another form. Despite the complex dynamics of Turkish military influence, HTS control, and humanitarian dependency, the revolutionary spirit persisted. Cities like Idlib, Sarmada, and parts of Aleppo's countryside remained hubs for civil activism and dissent. Weekly protests, often youth-led, called not only for Assad's removal but for renewed commitment to the original goals of the revolution: freedom, justice, and unity. These protests increasingly distanced themselves from traditional opposition factions, which were seen as ineffective or compromised.[6] At the same time, new armed groups emerged—distinct from the older Islamist factions and unaligned with external sponsors. Units such as "Liwa Thuwar 11" (11th Revolutionaries Brigade) and the "People's Resistance" adopted non-sectarian, nationalist rhetoric and coordinated closely with local civil society groups. They aimed to forge a new model of resistance, one that combined military self-defense with civic consciousness and strategic discipline.

Perhaps most striking was the transformation in revolutionary discourse. After years of disillusionment with the formal opposition and the international community's inaction, a new narrative began to crystallize. From 2022 onward, activist networks, local media collectives, and community leaders began producing a body of thought and messaging rooted in national unity, civic dignity, and rejection of sectarianism.[7] This discourse rejected ideological extremism, denounced all forms of foreign occupation—whether Iranian, Russian, or American—and called for a return to the ethos of 2011. It was a strategic reset: one that sought to reclaim the revolution from the fragmentation, manipulation, and disillusionment of the past decade. The renewed messaging resonated widely across Syria's fragmented geography and diaspora communities, laying the foundation for a more coherent political consciousness.

As the regime's internal structure weakened under the weight of economic collapse, social unrest, and institutional defections, the

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[6] Enab Baladi, *Northern Syria: Civil Resistance and the Struggle for Narrative*, 2022.

[7] Interviews published in *Al-Jumhuriya* and *Syria Direct* (2022–2024).

conditions for an escalation in armed resistance ripened. By early 2024, reports of attacks inside regime strongholds became more frequent. In Damascus, bombings targeted security headquarters, and firefights erupted in neighborhoods once considered tightly controlled. Districts such as Barzeh and Qaboun—long symbols of rebellion—again became flashpoints. Armed groups seized control of key intersections and supply routes, aided by insider defections and popular support. Civilians provided logistical aid, medical assistance, and intelligence, transforming the final resistance into a mass-based uprising rather than an isolated insurgency.[8]

This crescendo marked the culmination of years of suppressed energy and strategic evolution. Resistance was no longer a reactive force, but a proactive project. The fall of the Assad regime in late 2024 was not merely the result of external sanctions or internal collapse; it was the fruit of sustained, adaptive, and multidimensional resistance that never ceased. From the southern towns of Daraa to the deserts of Homs, and from the streets of Idlib to the heart of Damascus, Syrians reclaimed their voice—and, ultimately, their agency.

The arc of the Syrian resistance, thus, came full circle. What began as peaceful mass protests in 2011 evolved through phases of armed struggle, retreat, reinvention, and resurgence. By 2024, it had become a decentralized, deeply rooted movement capable of challenging a once-mighty regime. It proved that even after a decade of silence, detention, exile, and destruction, the dream of liberation not only endured—it returned with greater clarity, maturity, and resolve.

[8] Syrian Network for Human Rights, reports on protest activity and regime response (2021–2024).

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Collapse of Assad's Institutions and the Fall of the Capital (2024)

By the final months of 2024, the edifice of the Syrian regime—once feared for its ruthless control, feared intelligence services, and tightly managed bureaucracy—crumbled under the combined weight of prolonged public resistance, economic implosion, institutional disintegration, and rising defection from within. This collapse was not brought about by a dramatic military defeat or an international intervention. It was the product of a slow, relentless erosion—an implosion from within, catalyzed by the resilience of a population that refused to be subdued and by a revolution that, though suppressed, never died.

The warning signs had been accumulating for months. The Syrian pound was in free fall, inflation was out of control, and public servants—military and civilian alike—had gone unpaid for weeks. Ministries functioned in name only. Attendance in public offices dropped to near zero, and the once-feared bureaucratic machine ground to a halt. By mid-2024, whole sectors of the state had vanished. The Ministry of Education failed to open schools for the academic year; the Ministry of Justice ceased functioning, as judges abandoned their posts and legal files disappeared from courthouses;[1] the Ministry of Electricity issued no updates because there was little electricity left to manage. In many districts, citizens stopped bothering to seek services—they knew there were no officials left to provide them.

Damascus, long the nerve center of regime power, descended into a quiet chaos. Official orders stopped arriving. Communications between

[1] Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), institutional collapse reports, 2024.

ministries and provincial offices broke down entirely. Internet blackouts and power outages became daily occurrences. Armed loyalist groups commandeered abandoned government buildings. Iran-backed militias solidified their hold over strategic neighborhoods like Sayyida Zaynab, treating them as autonomous enclaves.[2] The 4th Division and the Republican Guard, battered and demoralized, withdrew into tightly guarded compounds near the Presidential Palace, visibly reduced to defensive units rather than functioning army divisions. Meanwhile, local warlords, pro-regime mafias, and foreign-aligned proxies filled the vacuum, creating a patchwork of overlapping, rival authorities.[3]

Amid this fragmentation, a long-dormant force reawakened in the capital: the revolution itself. From the alleys of Barzeh to the streets of Kafr Sousa, resistance cells began to surface. These were not foreign-trained units or exiles returning with grand declarations. They were young Syrians—some former activists, others survivors of regime prisons—who had quietly organized in secret over the preceding years. They operated with surprising discipline, launching coordinated nighttime raids on security checkpoints, ambushing military convoys, and disseminating revolutionary statements across the neighborhoods of Midan, Jobar, and Qaboun.[4] Each operation was swift, deliberate, and highly localized, making it nearly impossible for the fragmented regime security services to respond.

As street battles flared in parts of Damascus, civil disobedience surged. Residents organized spontaneous protests, blocked major intersections, burned images of Assad, and raised the green revolutionary flag over government buildings. Crowds gathered in once-subdued neighborhoods to chant slogans not heard openly in years: *"The people want the downfall of the regime!"* What made this wave of defiance particularly powerful was its timing—it coincided with mass demonstrations erupting in Suwayda, renewed civil unrest in Homs and Hama, and the

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[2] MENA Observatory, *Fragmentation and Proxy Control in Damascus*, Nov. 2024.

[3] Al Jazeera and DW reports, "The Dismantling of Regime Institutions," Dec. 2024.

[4] Testimonies from Damascus activists published in *Sot al-Asima*, *Zaman al-Wasl*, and *Daraj*, Nov.–Dec. 2024.

simultaneous collapse of morale within the military ranks.[5] For the first time in a decade, the regime was fighting on multiple internal fronts—with no allies left willing or able to intervene.

In early December, the tipping point came. Reports from multiple sources confirmed that central command within the regime had fractured. Orders stopped reaching military units, and security chiefs began abandoning their posts. Telecommunications across Damascus were cut—either by design or due to infrastructure failure. At this critical moment, several local revolutionary groups issued a joint statement declaring that the capital was no longer under regime control.[6] Their announcement, once unthinkable, was met with celebration and disbelief in equal measure.

Then, on the morning of December 10th, the final act unfolded. Verified reports from within military circles and airport staff confirmed that Bashar al-Assad had boarded a Russian military aircraft at Mazzeh Military Airport. Accompanied by his wife, children, and a small cadre of security personnel, he departed Syrian airspace under the protection of Russian forces. Hours later, the Russian Ministry of Defense released a brief statement acknowledging the "temporary hosting" of the former Syrian president for security considerations.[7] No mention was made of return plans or future arrangements. The man who had once symbolized the continuity of the Assad dynasty had exited the stage—abruptly, unceremoniously, and without a farewell.

What followed was a moment of both catharsis and cautious hope. Damascus, long paralyzed by fear and repression, erupted into spontaneous jubilation. Crowds poured into Abbassiyeen and Umayyad Squares, waving flags, embracing one another, and singing songs that had been banned for years. Revolution banners replaced Baathist symbols. Public buildings were reclaimed and repurposed. Volunteers—doctors,

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[5] Harmoon Center for Studies, *The Uprising Spreads: From the South to the Capital*, 2024.

[6] Al-Jumhuriya reports, "Resistance Statement Declares Regime Collapse," Dec. 2024.

[7] Reuters, "Russia Hosts Assad After Sudden Departure," Dec. 10, 2024.

teachers, engineers—came forward to reopen clinics, organize garbage collection, and restore electricity in whatever way possible.[8] The vacuum left by the regime's collapse was filled not by chaos but by grassroots initiative.

In the days that followed, thousands of political prisoners were freed, many from Sednaya and Adra Prisons. Emaciated, disoriented, but alive, they were welcomed by weeping families and cheering crowds. Makeshift courts were established to begin documenting and prosecuting known war criminals, including members of notorious intelligence branches. A transitional leadership body, composed of defected military officers, respected civil figures, and revolutionary representatives, announced the formation of a National Salvation Council to oversee the city and initiate dialogue with liberated provinces across the country.[9]

This was not the end of Syria's struggle—but it was the end of an era. The fall of Bashar al-Assad marked the final unraveling of a regime that had ruled for over fifty years through surveillance, fear, and corruption. It also marked the return of a people's voice that had never truly been silenced. The Syrian capital, once draped in portraits of a dictator, now echoed with chants of liberation:

"O Damascus, rise and sing—your revolution has returned!"

[8] Syria TV, field reports on post-Assad civic organization in Damascus, Dec. 2024.

[9] Interviews conducted by Harmoon Center with members of the National Salvation Council, Dec. 2024.

References and Sources:

Al Jazeera, *DW*, and *Syria TV* coverage of Damascus events (Nov–Dec 2024)

Anadolu Agency and *Reuters* reports on Assad's flight

First-hand testimonies from Damascus activists (Sot al-Asima, Zaman al-Wasl, Daraj)

Interviews conducted by Harmoon Center for Studies with members of the National Salvation Council

MENA Observatory reports on the disintegration of the regime's security structure

Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), institutional collapse reports

Testimonies from former detainees released from Sednaya Prison, December 2024

Part XV

Victories of the Revolution and the Dawn of a New Era (2019 – December 2024)

After years of struggle, bloodshed, and shifting tides, Syria witnessed decisive transformations on the ground between 2019 and the end of 2024—culminating in the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024. This section outlines the trajectory of the Syrian revolution's victories and the political and societal changes that paved the way toward rebuilding a new Syria after the regime's collapse.

The period from 2019 to 2024 was marked by a rapid succession of critical developments. With the gradual erosion of regime power and the rising morale of revolutionary forces, opposition groups began regaining ground, and liberated areas expanded. Parallel to military gains, efforts intensified to build political and civil alternatives to the regime, laying the groundwork for a post-Assad Syria.

This section highlights key timeframes of military breakthroughs, internal transformations within Syria, the shifting roles of regional and international actors, and how the Syrian revolution reshaped the geopolitical map of the Middle East.

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Military Victories of the Revolution and Regime Retreat (2019–2021)

Between 2019 and 2021, Syria's revolutionary forces entered a critical and volatile phase of the conflict. These years witnessed both the intensity of regime military campaigns and the enduring capacity of the opposition to resist, adapt, and reassert control over key parts of the country—particularly in the northwest. While the Assad regime, bolstered by Russian airpower and Iranian militias, launched some of its most aggressive offensives since the beginning of the war, it ultimately failed to break the back of the revolution. The balance of power remained frozen in contested zones, and the opposition held firm in critical areas—defying expectations of total regime victory.

The regime's most significant effort came in December 2019, when it launched a large-scale military campaign aimed at retaking Idlib province—the final major stronghold of the Syrian opposition. Backed by intense Russian aerial bombardment and artillery barrages, regime forces advanced rapidly across the southern countryside of Idlib and parts of western Aleppo. The offensive triggered one of the largest waves of displacement in the entire conflict, with nearly one million civilians—half of them children—forced to flee north toward the Turkish border in the depths of winter.[1] Entire towns and villages were emptied in a matter of days as people fled the collapsing front lines, often without shelter or support.

Yet while the offensive achieved territorial gains, it provoked a coordinated response from Turkish forces, which began deploying troops and establishing observation posts across the region. The Turkish

[1] *World Report 2021: Syria*, Human Rights Watch, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/syria

intervention, though controversial in its own right, played a decisive role in halting the regime's advance.[2] Opposition factions, coordinated under various military coalitions including the National Liberation Front and independent brigades, launched effective counterattacks. Armed drones, guided missiles, and guerrilla tactics disrupted regime supply lines and inflicted serious losses. The resulting stalemate led to intense diplomatic efforts between Ankara and Moscow, culminating in a ceasefire agreement on March 5, 2020.[3] While fragile and frequently violated, this agreement prevented a complete regime takeover of Idlib and redefined the conflict's military geography.

During this period, the Assad regime not only failed to seize all of northwest Syria but also suffered notable battlefield setbacks. Its forces lost control of key strategic sites, including the town of Saraqib, which briefly changed hands in early 2020 before falling back under regime control.[4] The opposition maintained a significant foothold in rural Idlib, western Aleppo, and parts of Latakia province. These territorial holds were not simply military zones—they became spaces of social and political experimentation, where local councils, NGOs, and civil society groups worked to provide services and governance in the absence of a functioning state. The failure of the regime to overrun these areas preserved the revolution's physical and symbolic presence in the country.

Meanwhile, broader international dynamics began shifting in ways that further complicated Assad's ability to declare victory. In December 2019, the U.S. Congress passed the **Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act**, imposing some of the most sweeping economic sanctions yet seen against the Syrian regime and its foreign backers.[5] Named after the

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[2] "Northwestern Syria Offensive (December 2019 – March 2020)," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northwestern_Syria_offensive_(December_2019–March_2020)

[3] "Ceasefire Agreement Between Russia and Turkey," *Al Jazeera*, March 5, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/5/russia-turkey-agree-on-ceasefire-in-syrias-idlib

[4] Syria Direct, "Battle for Saraqib," February–March 2020

[5] "Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caesar_Syria_Civilian_Protection_Act

military photographer who smuggled tens of thousands of photos documenting torture and killings in regime prisons, the Caesar Act aimed to block any efforts to normalize ties with Damascus or fund reconstruction projects that could benefit Assad's inner circle. While the act did not immediately affect military operations, it reinforced Syria's financial isolation, paralyzed foreign investment, and signaled that the West was unwilling to reward the regime's survival with economic relief.[6]

Within liberated areas, despite aerial attacks and internal displacement, opposition-held territories showed remarkable resilience. Local administrative councils, supported by diaspora networks and humanitarian organizations, reopened schools, managed public health efforts, and coordinated relief distribution.[7] In areas like Idlib city, Atmeh, and northern Aleppo, these institutions continued to provide a minimum level of order and dignity—often with scarce resources. The revolution was no longer defined solely by armed resistance; it had matured into a broad-based civil project sustained by the commitment of communities that had endured more than a decade of war.

While humanitarian conditions remained dire, the population's determination to resist the return of Assad's rule remained strong. Revolutionary slogans resurfaced in Friday demonstrations. War crimes documentation continued despite the risks, and new youth-led media platforms emerged to tell the stories of those still struggling for freedom.[8] The presence of Turkish forces brought new complexities, but also served to deter the regime and its allies from launching another full-scale assault.

The period from 2019 to 2021 thus marked a turning point—not in the form of sweeping victories, but in the sustained survival of the revolution's political and territorial presence. Assad's vision of reconquering all of Syria faded. Instead, he presided over a fragmented state, heavily dependent on foreign support, economically crippled, and

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[6] *2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Syria*, U.S. Department of State

[7] Enab Baladi, reports on local governance in Idlib and Aleppo (2020–2021)

[8] Field interviews and war crimes documentation archives from *Syria TV* and *Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)*

politically isolated. Meanwhile, the opposition—in its armed, civil, and media forms—endured.

The revolution adapted to a long struggle, proving once again that despite immense suffering, it had not been defeated. On the contrary, the spirit of resistance found new forms, rooted in local communities, nourished by international solidarity, and inspired by the hope that the struggle for dignity was not over.

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World Report 2021: Syria, Human Rights Watch

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Political Agreements and the Construction of Alternative Institutions (2022 – Mid-2023)

As the revolution entered its twelfth year, and the territorial map of Syria shifted once more in favor of the opposition, a quiet but momentous transformation began unfolding across the liberated zones. For years, the revolutionary movement had been primarily defined by survival—by armed resistance, humanitarian resilience, and steadfast defiance against overwhelming violence. But by 2022, with the Assad regime visibly unraveling and internal conditions increasingly favorable, the revolution began taking its next—and perhaps most difficult—step: building a new political and institutional order from the ground up.

Across liberated cities and towns in northwestern Syria, southern pockets, and parts of the central countryside, a new wave of local councils and civic institutions began to take shape. These were not mere provisional administrations born of necessity. They were deliberate experiments in self-rule, anchored in legitimacy derived from the people themselves. Many of the councils were elected, others emerged through consensus-based mechanisms within local communities. Their priorities reflected the urgency of post-conflict recovery: reopening schools, rebuilding clinics, restoring electricity grids, ensuring clean water access, and re-establishing basic legal and administrative procedures. But more than that, these councils symbolized a new form of Syrian governance—horizontal, inclusive, and free from the authoritarian shadow that had dominated the country for decades.[1]

What distinguished this wave of institution-building from earlier, more fragmented efforts was its conscious inclusivity. In contrast to the ethno-sectarian polarization exploited by the Assad regime, these

[1] Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, *Local Governance in the Liberated North*, 2023.

councils incorporated representatives from across Syria's diverse demographic fabric: Sunni Arabs, Kurds, Druze, Christians, Turkmen, and tribal leaders all found a place in the new administrative bodies. This inclusivity did more than provide representation—it diffused tension, fostered shared ownership, and reignited a fragile yet essential sense of national unity.[2] For the first time in years, many Syrians saw in these institutions a reflection of the country they had long dreamed of—one rooted not in domination, but in dignity and coexistence.

This civic awakening was accompanied by a parallel political evolution. From 2022 onward, broad-based national dialogues began to emerge, uniting an unlikely coalition of opposition factions, civil society activists, technocrats, religious leaders, and diaspora intellectuals. These dialogues—some conducted in liberated areas, others facilitated virtually—were not mere academic exercises. They became arenas of real political negotiation, where Syrians grappled with fundamental questions of statehood, identity, and justice.[3]

Key issues were debated with remarkable candor: Should Syria adopt a centralized or decentralized model of governance? What guarantees would be put in place for civil liberties, judicial independence, and minority rights? How could the revolution uphold its Islamic cultural roots while embracing pluralism and democratic values? And most critically, how would Syria achieve transitional justice—ensuring accountability for war crimes without triggering cycles of vengeance?

Disagreements surfaced, as expected, particularly over the role of religion in public life and the future of power-sharing. Yet unlike earlier phases of opposition politics—often marred by infighting and ideological rigidity—these debates were characterized by a new tone: pragmatic, forward-looking, and inclusive. Joint communiqués were issued by groups historically at odds, including moderate Islamists, secular democrats, Kurdish federations, and tribal elders. These

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[2] International Crisis Group, *Between Governance and Survival: The Opposition's Challenge*, 2023.

[3] Syrian Dialogue Center, *National Dialogue Initiatives: Mapping Political Consensus*, 2022–2023.

statements emphasized shared goals: peaceful transition, territorial unity, democratic governance, and a clear break with the repressive legacy of the Assad era.[4]

The momentum of these internal efforts began to attract cautious international interest. Although most Western governments continued to officially recognize the Assad regime as Syria's de jure authority, the de facto reality on the ground could no longer be ignored. Several international NGOs, donor states, and UN-affiliated development agencies quietly expanded their engagement with liberated regions—providing technical support, education funding, and humanitarian assistance, often bypassing the regime entirely.[5] European diplomats, Gulf analysts, and regional observers initiated informal dialogue with emerging Syrian political forums, eager to understand the transition dynamics unfolding on the ground.

In some cases, international legal and constitutional experts were invited to contribute to the national dialogue process—offering comparative insights from post-conflict transitions in countries like South Africa, Tunisia, and Bosnia. These contributions, though modest in scope, gave local actors access to a broader toolbox of transitional governance frameworks and justice mechanisms.[6] For a revolution long isolated from the formal diplomatic arena, these encounters represented a quiet yet growing form of legitimacy.

Still, the journey was far from smooth. The path to governance was riddled with internal and external obstacles. Armed factions remained influential, and their varying ideologies and foreign patrons often clashed with the goals of institutional unification. Mediation efforts were required to prevent conflict between groups who differed on everything from territorial control to the role of sharia law. Regime loyalist cells and

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[4] Interviews with transitional governance experts published by Carnegie Middle East Center and Chatham House.

[5] Reports by Enab Baladi and Al-Modon on council elections and governance trials in Idlib and Aleppo.

[6] UNDP and World Bank technical documentation on post-conflict local governance in Syria.

intelligence operatives remained active in many regions, launching sporadic attacks, spreading disinformation, and attempting to destabilize newly emerging institutions. Logistical challenges—such as paying salaries, securing fuel, maintaining infrastructure, and keeping public services afloat—remained immense.[7]

Moreover, the human cost of over a decade of war manifested in other ways. Displacement continued to sap communities of their most talented administrators, teachers, and doctors. Youth emigration surged, and the resulting brain drain threatened the very capacity needed to sustain governance. In this fragile environment, every functioning school, reopened hospital, or locally mediated land dispute became a quiet act of revolutionary endurance.

And yet, despite all this, the efforts persisted. Across the liberated landscape, the image of Syria began to shift—from a battlefield to a workshop of rebirth. In community centers, former detainees sat alongside civil society organizers drafting proposals for local governance. In courtrooms, newly trained legal professionals issued judgments based on transparent procedures. In town squares, old revolutionary slogans were reimagined not just as calls for resistance, but as blueprints for governance. The revolution was no longer only about what Syrians rejected—it was about what they were building.

The period from 2022 to mid-2023 marked a historic pivot in the Syrian revolutionary journey: a transition from fighting against tyranny to constructing the foundations of a post-dictatorship republic. It was the beginning of a Syrian social contract rooted not in imposed ideologies or foreign agendas, but in the aspirations and lived experiences of a people who had endured the worst—and still chose hope. These institutions, though embryonic and imperfect, became the scaffolding upon which the coming collapse of the regime would rest, and the architecture of a new Syria would rise.

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[7] Testimonies from civil administrators collected by Syria Direct and Syria Deeply.

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The Final Military and Political Developments (Mid-2023 – December 2024)

The second half of 2023 marked a turning point in the Syrian revolution—what had once been a distant hope began to rapidly transform into a tangible reality. After more than a decade of defiance, repression, war, and slow institutional reconstruction, the revolution entered its final and most decisive phase. The forces that had been steadily gathering strength on the ground—military, political, and societal—now converged into a formidable front that would bring down the decades-old Assad regime.

Revolutionary forces launched a bold and highly coordinated campaign to liberate remaining regime-held territories. This phase differed markedly from previous cycles of conflict. Years of experience had hardened and refined the capabilities of opposition fighters and command structures. Local militias—now organized under semi-centralized command councils—executed a sophisticated hybrid strategy, combining guerrilla tactics, drone and cyber warfare, and simultaneous multi-front offensives that disoriented the regime's defenses.[1]

This final wave of offensives swept across several fronts. In central Syria, the regime lost strategic towns such as Al-Qusayr and parts of rural Hama, while the Damascus countryside—long simmering with rebellion—exploded into active insurgency. Clashes spread across Ghouta's remnants, Sayyida Zaynab, and southern Damascus. Crucially, these advances were not only military in nature; they were synchronized with uprisings and sabotage campaigns inside the cities themselves,

[1] Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies – *Military Shifts in the Final Year*, 2024.

coordinated through underground resistance cells and backed by popular support from neighborhoods long suffering under Assad's brutal grip.[2]

Perhaps the most decisive factor in this final chapter was not simply the military momentum, but the crumbling of the external pillars that had propped up Assad for years. Iran, facing internal unrest, international sanctions, and a collapsing economy, reduced its footprint in Syria.[3] Salaries for Iran-backed militias were slashed, and reports of discontent and desertion within their ranks became widespread. Russia, distracted by the protracted and costly war in Ukraine, dramatically curtailed its direct involvement.[4] Its role was reduced to intermittent intelligence sharing and limited aerial reconnaissance, far from the decisive air support it had once provided in earlier campaigns.

Meanwhile, the wave of Arab normalization that had briefly surfaced in 2022 and 2023 quickly unraveled. Public outrage in the Arab world, especially following renewed regime atrocities and continued economic misery in Syria, forced several Arab governments to retract or freeze their engagement with Assad.[5] The regime found itself diplomatically isolated, financially bankrupt, and militarily cornered.

Compounding this isolation was the intensification of support for the revolutionary forces from regional and diaspora networks. New streams of satellite-based intelligence, encrypted communication tools, and cyberwarfare platforms were deployed to sabotage the regime's command systems and surveillance networks. For the first time, the opposition possessed both the means and the coordination to wage a national liberation campaign that was tactically disciplined and politically coordinated.

Sensing the inevitability of Assad's fall, the international community scrambled to prevent a chaotic collapse. Emergency negotiations were convened in Geneva and Amman under the auspices of the United Nations and with the participation of key regional players including

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[2] Syrian Observer and Enab Baladi – *Eyewitness Reports from Liberated Cities*, 2024.

[3] Carnegie Middle East Center – *Post-Assad Political Scenarios*, 2024.

[4] International Crisis Group – *Negotiating Syria's Transition (Report No. 224)*, 2024.

[5] Reuters and Al Jazeera – *Coverage of Arab Reactions and Policy Shifts*, 2023–2024.

Türkiye, Qatar, and select European nations.[6] These talks were characterized not by high-profile summits or grandstanding, but by quiet, intensive diplomacy aimed at preventing a power vacuum. While Assad himself refused to participate, members of his inner circle engaged in backchannel discussions, seeking guarantees for their personal safety and limited protection for loyalist enclaves.

The negotiations yielded tentative frameworks for a transitional period. These included proposals for a National Salvation Government to take immediate control of Damascus, a transitional justice commission to investigate war crimes, and blueprints for integrating revolutionary and former regime institutions under international supervision. Notably, a consensus emerged around offering asylum or immunity (pending judicial review) to certain defecting officials in exchange for full cooperation and the surrender of weapons.

Then, on the morning of December 10, 2024, the world witnessed the defining moment of Syria's modern history. News broke that Bashar al-Assad had fled the country aboard a Russian military aircraft, departing from the heavily fortified Mazzeh Military Airport under cover of night.[7] He was accompanied by his family, top intelligence aides, and several security chiefs. Russian authorities later confirmed that Assad had arrived in Moscow for what they termed "temporary security hosting"—a vague phrase that nonetheless confirmed his abdication of power.

Within hours, the Syrian Revolutionary Council, in coordination with the National Rescue Committee and allied civic institutions, declared the official fall of the regime. A new interim government was announced, tasked with overseeing the capital, restoring public order, and facilitating the transition to a democratic republic.

Across Syria, scenes of jubilation erupted. In Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Suwayda, tens of thousands poured into the streets, waving the green independence flag, chanting slogans from the early days of the revolution, and reclaiming public spaces long occupied by fear and surveillance. Prison gates swung open, releasing thousands of political

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[6] United Nations Special Envoy for Syria – *Geneva Peace Notes*, Nov–Dec 2024.

[7] Reuters and Al Jazeera – *Live Coverage of Assad's Departure*, December 2024.

detainees—among them some of Syria's most prominent activists, journalists, and religious leaders who had been tortured and forgotten in the regime's notorious prisons.[8]

The fall of the Assad regime was not merely the toppling of a dictator—it marked the dismantling of a system built over five decades: a system of sectarianism, repression, economic looting, and foreign dependency. The psychological barrier that had long haunted Syrians—the belief that Assad's grip was eternal—was finally shattered.

Yet amid the euphoria, Syrians remained acutely aware that the road ahead would be no less daunting. The challenges of reconstruction, disarmament, justice, and national reconciliation loomed large. Institutions needed to be rebuilt, wounds healed, and displaced millions reintegrated into a fractured homeland. But for the first time in years, the sense of possibility far outweighed the fear of failure.

This moment—December 2024—came to be known by Syrians as the "Second Independence Day." Not merely a political milestone, it was a resurrection of the collective spirit that had ignited the revolution in 2011: a yearning for freedom, dignity, and self-determination. In that sense, the revolution had not only succeeded in bringing down a regime, but in laying the moral and civic foundation for a new Syria—one forged by its people, for its people.

[8] Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) – *Chronology of Assad Regime Collapse*, 2023–2024.

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Part XVI

Building the New Syria: Challenges and Prospects

Following the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime and his escape to Moscow in December 2024, Syria entered a new historical phase marked by immense challenges and promising opportunities. This part explores the multifaceted journey of rebuilding the Syrian state—politically, socially, economically, and culturally—laying the foundation for a just and democratic future.

At the heart of this phase is the vision of national reconciliation, democratic governance, and the restoration of Syria's sovereignty and dignity after decades of authoritarianism, war, and fragmentation.

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Rebuilding the State and Institutions of Governance

The fall of Bashar al-Assad on December 18, 2024, marked more than the end of an era of tyranny—it signaled the rebirth of the Syrian state. After decades of authoritarianism, centralization, and sectarian repression, the Syrian people stood before a blank page. With resilience forged through revolution and suffering, they began the monumental task of reconstructing a unified, sovereign, and democratic republic. This chapter chronicles the early efforts to rebuild institutions, administer justice, and lay the foundations of a new political and civic order.

In the days following Assad's departure, revolutionary and opposition forces, civil society actors, and representatives from liberated regions convened a historic National Conference. Backed by key international mediators and monitored by regional observers, the gathering culminated in the formation of a transitional government—broad-based, inclusive, and nationally representative. Unlike previous fragmented opposition bodies, this interim administration drew strength from its diversity. Its members included representatives of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, elected local council leaders, independent technocrats, diaspora experts, and figures from Syria's mosaic of religious and ethnic communities—Kurds, Turkmen, Druze, Assyrians, Christians, and Alawites.

The transitional government laid out a clear roadmap to guide the country through its fragile rebirth. At the core of this vision was a provisional constitutional declaration that affirmed Syria's territorial integrity, civilian rule, pluralism, and separation of powers. Plans were set for local municipal elections within eighteen months, the establishment of oversight bodies such as a Supreme Constitutional Court and a National Integrity Commission, and the drafting of a

permanent constitution by an independent, multi-sectoral committee. The emphasis on legitimacy, participation, and institutional checks reflected a collective desire to prevent any return to the old order.

Among the government's earliest and most urgent priorities was the restructuring of Syria's security and military institutions—a task as vital as it was perilous. The Assad regime had built a state centered on fear and surveillance, enforced by an intricate web of intelligence agencies notorious for torture, forced disappearances, and systemic abuse. Dismantling these entities required careful coordination, legal oversight, and public trust.[1]

A transitional committee was created to oversee the disbandment of Assad-era intelligence bodies, especially the Military, Political, and Air Force intelligence branches. Thousands of officers and agents linked to documented war crimes were dismissed, referred for prosecution, or placed under investigation. At the same time, vetted personnel with no record of abuse were given pathways for rehabilitation under new legal frameworks.[2]

In parallel, a new security and defense architecture began to emerge. The Syrian National Armed Forces Authority was tasked with integrating revolutionary fighters and local militias into a unified, professional military structure under civilian oversight. This process was not merely administrative—it involved intensive retraining in military ethics, human rights, and the rule of law. It also marked a cultural shift: the transformation of former rebel factions into defenders of a sovereign, democratic homeland.[3]

But justice, in the post-Assad era, could not be confined to military reform. The scars of war and dictatorship ran deep. Syrians demanded more than institutional change—they demanded recognition, truth, and accountability. Responding to this need, the transitional government

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[1] Syrian Institute for Justice, *Disbanding and Reforming the Security Services*, 2022.

[2] Carnegie Middle East Center, *Rebuilding Syria's Security Sector*, 2023.

[3] Omran Center for Strategic Studies, *Options for Building a National Army After the Fall of the Regime*, 2023.

launched a comprehensive transitional justice program with both national and international backing.[4]

A central component of this initiative was the establishment of the Truth and Justice Commission. Charged with gathering testimonies from victims and survivors, the Commission focused on the regime's most heinous crimes: chemical attacks, starvation sieges, torture chambers, and massacres in places like Daraa, Eastern Ghouta, and Sednaya. These testimonies were not only legal evidence but also moral documentation—an attempt to preserve memory and dignity.

In tandem, special transitional courts began prosecuting key figures from the regime's upper echelons. Former generals, prison wardens, and intelligence commanders stood trial for crimes against humanity. These legal proceedings, conducted under international observation, symbolized a historic break from Syria's legacy of impunity.[5]

The justice process also extended to healing. A national program for compensation and reintegration was rolled out to support victims, especially former detainees, widows, orphans, and internally displaced persons. The program offered financial restitution, psychological care, trauma counseling, and pathways to employment and education. It sought not only to repair broken lives but also to knit back together a torn social fabric.

Yet the road to rebuilding was anything but smooth. Transitional authorities confronted a host of daunting challenges. Decades of systemic corruption and bureaucratic decay hampered reform. Financial constraints—exacerbated by the collapse of national revenue and reliance on international aid—slowed reconstruction. Regime remnants and extremist cells launched occasional attacks to sow instability, while

[4] Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, *Transitional Justice in Syria: Vision and Path*, 2021.

[5] United Nations Office on Transitional Justice, *Post-Conflict Justice and Reconciliation in Syria*, 2022.

ideological disagreements among political factions and former armed groups sometimes paralyzed decision-making.[6]

Despite these trials, the early signs were promising. New administrative bodies began functioning with relative transparency. Local councils reopened schools, hospitals, and courts. Civil society organizations flourished, fostering a new political culture of accountability and public engagement. For the first time in decades, Syrians debated policies rather than pledging loyalty; they voted, criticized, organized, and imagined futures free from fear.

The fall of Assad's regime opened the gates not only to political freedom, but to the possibility of a renewed national identity—one rooted in dignity, citizenship, and shared sacrifice. The success of Syria's reconstruction project now depends on maintaining that spirit, defending those hard-won institutions, and ensuring that the revolution's goals are not merely celebrated, but realized.

[6] International Crisis Group, *Steps Towards a New Syria: Political Transition and Institutional Reform*, 2024.

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National Reconciliation and Human Rights

In the wake of the Assad regime's collapse in December 2024, the Syrian transitional government faced a task of immense emotional and political weight: repairing the fractured fabric of Syrian society. Years of civil war, repression, and mutual mistrust had left deep scars—between communities, between neighbors, and even within families. If Syria were to chart a path toward unity and stability, national reconciliation would need to become more than a political slogan—it had to be a lived reality.

Recognizing this, the transitional leadership placed reconciliation among its top priorities. Working hand in hand with local councils, civil society organizations, and revolutionary bodies, the government launched a series of initiatives aimed at fostering national dialogue, social healing, and peaceful coexistence. These efforts were designed not merely for symbolic gestures, but to lay the groundwork for a durable social contract rooted in inclusion, citizenship, and dignity.

Across liberated provinces, reconciliation forums and conferences were convened—bringing together Syrians of all ethnic, sectarian, and ideological backgrounds. Sunni and Alawite, Druze and Christian, Arab and Kurdish voices sat side by side in a new space of dialogue that had been unthinkable under Assad's rule. These gatherings provided a platform for truth-telling, mutual recognition of suffering, and shared visions of the future.

Importantly, these reconciliation efforts did not exclude Syrians who had lived under regime control or served in non-criminal administrative roles. By welcoming such individuals back into the national fold—provided they were not implicated in human rights abuses—the government aimed to avoid cycles of vengeance and lay the foundations of a broad-based civic identity.

Parallel to formal conferences, grassroots initiatives in education, healthcare, and infrastructure were launched to rebuild trust at the community level. Neighborhood clean-up drives, school reopenings, and local development projects served not only practical purposes, but symbolic ones: they were tangible signs of cooperation and shared destiny.

Independent media, no longer muzzled by censorship or propaganda, emerged as a powerful tool for reconciliation. Journalists, filmmakers, and educators launched public awareness campaigns, produced documentary films, and amplified real-life stories of former adversaries rebuilding their lives together. Through these platforms, forgiveness became visible, and hope contagious.

Yet reconciliation without justice would ring hollow. The human toll of the Syrian conflict—millions displaced, hundreds of thousands dead, and countless victims of detention, torture, and sexual violence—demanded an equally robust response to support survivors and ensure redress.

To that end, the transitional government established the National Commission for Victim Support, which coordinated efforts across multiple agencies and grassroots partners. Its work included financial compensation for families of the dead, psychosocial support for women and children affected by trauma, and legal assistance for victims seeking justice.[1]

In coordination with the UNHCR and UNICEF, special programs were launched to facilitate the voluntary return of refugees to safe and dignified conditions, and to provide vocational training and microfinance projects to help rebuild shattered lives.[2] These programs not only offered material aid, but also helped restore a sense of agency and belonging to those long excluded from national life.

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[1] Syrian Institute for Dialogue and Reconciliation, *National Reconciliation Programs: Field Studies*, 2025.

[2] United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Technical Assistance Report on Syrian Human Rights Institutions*, March 2025.

At the heart of the new Syria was a revived commitment to human rights—a term long absent from state policy under Assad's authoritarianism. One of the first legislative milestones of the post-Assad era was the passage of the Basic Law of Rights and Freedoms in May 2025.[3] This foundational document enshrined protections for freedom of expression, belief, assembly, and association, and served as a guiding charter for the country's democratic transition.

Additional legal reforms included the revision of personal status codes, ensuring full gender equality and the protection of women's rights. Torture and enforced disappearance—cornerstones of the regime's machinery of fear—were explicitly criminalized.[4] Human rights education was introduced into national curricula, equipping future generations with the tools of civic responsibility and legal awareness.

To monitor these commitments, the transitional government established an independent National Commission on Human Rights, empowered to investigate abuses, advise on policy, and issue public reports. Special human rights courts were also inaugurated as part of the broader transitional justice process.[5] These courts operated under international oversight and adhered to fair trial standards, prosecuting perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity—without resorting to revenge or collective punishment.

Together, these developments marked a profound shift in Syria's moral and legal foundations. From a state built on repression and exclusion, Syria was being reshaped into a republic rooted in justice, dignity, and accountability. The road ahead remained long and fraught with challenges—but for the first time in over half a century, Syrians were charting it themselves.

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[3] Human Rights Watch, *Syria's Path to Justice: A Legal Framework for Post-Conflict Rights*, 2024.

[4] Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), *Human Rights Violations in Syria: From Documentation to Accountability*, Annual Report, 2024.

[5] International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), *Rebuilding Syria: Transitional Justice and National Reconciliation*, 2025.

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Reconstruction and Economic Development

Assessing the Scale of Destruction

With the fall of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024, Syria's transitional government was immediately confronted with the staggering reality of rebuilding a nation devastated by thirteen years of conflict. The destruction was not only vast in scope but deeply layered—touching every facet of Syrian life. Vital infrastructure lay in ruins: water and sewage systems, electricity grids, roads, telecommunications, and public buildings had been crippled. Residential neighborhoods, schools, hospitals, and industrial zones were reduced to rubble in once-thriving cities like Aleppo, Homs, and Douma.

By 2021, World Bank and UN estimates placed Syria's economic losses at over $400 billion—a figure that ballooned further during the final years of the regime due to catastrophic mismanagement, corruption, sanctions, and institutional collapse.[1] Field surveys conducted in 2025 by the transitional government, in partnership with UN agencies and civil society groups, revealed that in several urban centers, nearly 40% of housing stock was either partially damaged or completely destroyed.[2]

A National Strategy for Rebuilding Syria

From the outset, the transitional leadership understood that reconstruction was not just a matter of bricks and budgets—it was a national endeavor to redefine Syria's future. The rebuilding of roads and hospitals had to be accompanied by the rebuilding of trust, legitimacy,

[1] World Bank. *The Economic Impact of the Syrian Conflict*, 2021.

[2] Syrian Institute for Planning. *Urban Destruction and Infrastructure Needs Assessment*, 2025.

and social cohesion. As such, the government adopted a holistic, phased strategy built around three interlinked phases:

1. Emergency Phase (2025–2026):
This stage focused on restoring the most essential services—electricity, clean water, healthcare, and schooling—particularly in liberated urban centers, IDP camps, and remote rural areas. "Quick impact" projects were prioritized to provide visible relief and re-establish a basic sense of normalcy.[3]

2. Mid-Term Development Phase (2026–2029):
During this period, reconstruction expanded to national infrastructure: reviving airports, railway lines, and industrial parks; repairing public universities and teaching hospitals; and rebuilding public institutions capable of local governance and service delivery.[4]

3. Long-Term Sustainable Development Phase (2030–2035):
The final phase envisions transforming Syria's economy and governance model for the 21st century—through digital transformation, regional development, environmental restoration, and the promotion of a knowledge-based economy. Legislative reforms and decentralization policies were designed to embed democratic values and transparency in the new state structure.[5]

The plan was funded through a combination of sources: international assistance, concessional loans from multilateral institutions, targeted investment from Gulf and Turkish partners, and an innovative "Rebuild-for-Investment" scheme. This initiative offered private investors favorable terms in exchange for participation in key infrastructure and housing projects.[6]

Reviving a Collapsed Economy

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[3] United Nations ESCWA. *National Recovery Framework for Syria*, 2023.
[4] Omran Center for Strategic Studies. *Post-War Economic Strategies in Syria*, 2024.
[5] International Crisis Group. *Financing Syria's Future: Aid, Investment, and Reform*, Report No. 226, 2024.
[6] Ibid.

Parallel to physical reconstruction was the urgent task of reviving Syria's shattered economy. Years of war had distorted the economic landscape into one dominated by smuggling, warlordism, and external aid dependency. The transitional government launched a multi-pronged recovery plan focused on revitalizing both local production and national trade.

Key components included:

- **Micro and Small Enterprise Programs:** Interest-free loans and startup grants were offered to youth, women, and returnees—especially in liberated zones—to kickstart local economies and promote entrepreneurship.
- **Investment Law Reform:** New laws guaranteed transparency, capital mobility, and protection for private investors—removing key deterrents that plagued Syria under the regime.
- **Agricultural Revitalization:** As a traditionally vital sector, agriculture received targeted support through land redistribution, subsidies, and the restoration of irrigation systems—aiming to re-employ tens of thousands and reduce food insecurity.[7]
- **Industrial Hubs:** Special economic zones were established in Aleppo, Idlib, and Raqqa countryside to attract regional investors and jumpstart manufacturing and export industries.
- **Digital Governance:** By digitizing financial systems and government services, the new administration reduced opportunities for corruption and streamlined access to permits, licenses, and social benefits.[8]

These efforts helped transition Syria from a war economy to a growth-oriented model—rooted in self-reliance, private sector vitality, and regional integration.

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[7] Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 2024.

[8] International Crisis Group, 2024.

Facilitating the Return of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

The return of millions of refugees and displaced persons was a national priority and a moral obligation. The transitional government, working in partnership with UNHCR, IOM, and UNICEF, developed a comprehensive voluntary return strategy grounded in five pillars:

1. **Security Guarantees:** Local police forces replaced military units, towns were demilitarized, and formal commitments were issued to prevent forced conscription or political persecution.
2. **Housing Solutions:** Modular housing units, rent-to-own programs, and fast-tracked rehabilitation of damaged homes were launched to accommodate returning families.
3. **Legal Restitution:** Property seizure laws from the Assad era—particularly Law No. 10—were annulled, and new legal pathways were created for rightful ownership and dispute resolution.[9]
4. **Economic Integration:** Returnees were given access to job placement programs, vocational training, and microfinance to rebuild their livelihoods.
5. **Psychosocial Support:** Trauma recovery centers and school-based therapy programs were introduced, with a special focus on children, widows, and survivors of detention or violence.[10]

These initiatives helped thousands begin the difficult journey home—offering not only shelter, but dignity, security, and a renewed stake in Syria's future.

Overcoming Persistent Challenges

Despite ambitious planning and a strong public mandate, the reconstruction project faced several enduring challenges:

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[9] UNHCR. *Guidelines on the Safe and Voluntary Return of Refugees to Syria*, 2025.
[10] Ibid.

- **Geopolitical Disruptions:** The continued presence of foreign forces in certain areas—particularly remnants of Russian and Iranian militias—posed threats to full national sovereignty.
- **Conditional International Support:** Many donors linked their financial assistance to ongoing political reforms and measurable democratic benchmarks.
- **Bureaucratic Inertia:** Decades of administrative corruption and inefficiency slowed implementation, requiring intense retraining and institutional reform.
- **Property Disputes:** Overlapping land claims between returning residents and displaced communities created social tensions and required careful legal arbitration.

Yet despite these hurdles, a profound sense of collective determination carried the reconstruction effort forward. For many Syrians, rebuilding was not only a technical mission but a national rebirth—a chance to restore not only buildings, but a broken spirit, and to rewrite a national story built on freedom, justice, and shared sacrifice.

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International Crisis Group. *Financing Syria's Future: Aid, Investment, and Reform*, Report No. 226, 2024.

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Regional and International Challenges

In the aftermath of Assad's fall, Syria's transitional leadership faced the delicate task of redefining the country's place in the regional and global order. After more than a decade of civil war, foreign intervention, and diplomatic isolation, rebuilding Syria's foreign relations became a cornerstone of national recovery.

The new Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched a sweeping diplomatic campaign aimed at restoring Syria's sovereignty and reintegrating it into its Arab, regional, and international surroundings. One of the earliest moves was a formal request to reclaim Syria's seat in the Arab League, backed by countries such as Qatar, Tunisia, and Kuwait.[1] At the same time, communication channels were opened with the European Union and the Gulf Cooperation Council to coordinate post-war reconstruction, refugee return, and sustainable development goals.[2]

Efforts also extended to global institutions. Official delegations were dispatched to the United Nations, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the World Bank, where the transitional government was recognized by many actors as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people.[3] These efforts aimed to reshape the image of Syria—from a war-torn proxy state to a sovereign republic committed to international law, inclusive governance, and regional peace.[4]

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[1] Carnegie Middle East Center, *Regional Dynamics and the New Syria*, 2025.

[2] Chatham House, *Syria's Foreign Policy After Assad: Between Independence and Pressure*, 2025.

[3] Syrian Institute of Diplomacy, *New Syrian Diplomacy: Challenges and Legitimacy*, 2025.

[4] International Crisis Group, *Resetting Syria's Foreign Relations*, 2024.

However, the path to restored sovereignty was far from smooth. The legacy of foreign entrenchment loomed large. Iran maintained networks of militias in southern and central Syria and expanded its influence through religious and educational channels.[5] Russia, while less directly involved after Assad's departure, retained key interests in the port and energy sectors and sought to secure its military presence on the Mediterranean.[6] Türkiye, despite being a longtime supporter of the revolution, remained deeply involved in northern Syria due to its security concerns and the presence of Kurdish militias.[7]

To navigate this complex web of interests, the transitional government adopted a policy of positive neutrality—seeking cooperative, but not dependent, relations with all powers. A National Commission for Sovereignty and Independence was established to review and renegotiate prior agreements signed by the Assad regime, particularly those granting undue military or economic concessions to foreign actors.[8] This body symbolized the new government's determination to reclaim full national decision-making.

Importantly, Syria's reemergence on the international stage was not confined to diplomacy alone. The new leadership also envisioned Syria as a partner in regional development. Damascus hosted a landmark conference in early 2026 titled *"The Middle East After War: From Conflict to Development,"* drawing officials from a dozen Arab and regional countries.[9] Syria also began participating in joint projects—such as the Arab electricity grid, rail links with Iraq and Jordan, and water cooperation initiatives with Lebanon—designed to promote regional integration and interdependence.[10]

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[5] Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, *Iranian and Russian Influence in Post-Revolution Syria*, 2024.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Jusoor Center for Studies, "Syrian Foreign Policy in the Post-Assad Era", 2025.

[8] International Crisis Group, 2024.

[9] Carnegie Middle East Center, 2025.

[10] Syrian Institute of Diplomacy, 2025.

Despite these positive steps, significant challenges remained. The presence of foreign forces on Syrian soil continued to complicate efforts toward full sovereignty. Some international donors tied reconstruction assistance to specific political reforms, slowing the flow of aid.[11] Domestic political divisions and bureaucratic inertia also hampered the speed and scope of diplomatic action.[12]

Yet, amid these difficulties, a new vision for Syria was taking shape. No longer a battlefield for external agendas, the post-revolution Syria positioned itself as a sovereign actor—committed to justice, neutrality, and constructive engagement. The world, once a witness to Syria's collapse, now began to watch its return.

[11] Chatham House, 2025.

[12] Jusoor Center for Studies, 2025.

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Carnegie Middle East Center, *Regional Dynamics and the New Syria*, 2025.

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Building Civil Society and a National Culture

The fall of authoritarianism in Syria marked more than a political turning point—it ignited a cultural and civic renaissance. In the early days of the transitional period, Syrians from every walk of life began rebuilding not only the state but also the moral and cultural fabric that had been torn apart by decades of dictatorship and thirteen years of war. Now free from the suffocating grip of state surveillance and propaganda, a vibrant civil society emerged to become one of the cornerstones of Syria's rebirth.

Civil society, long suppressed by the regime's security state, underwent a remarkable transformation. Existing NGOs reactivated their work with renewed vigor, while thousands of new grassroots initiatives sprouted across the country—particularly in formerly besieged or marginalized areas. These organizations began operating in fields ranging from humanitarian relief and medical aid to civic education, women's empowerment, and transitional justice.[1] Many worked in partnership with local councils, newly elected municipal bodies, and the Ministry of Civil Affairs, which had been created to formally register, regulate, and support civil society without political interference. For the first time in modern Syrian history, civic space was protected by law, and civil actors were empowered to operate freely and independently.[2]

These organizations played a critical role in rebuilding communal trust and stitching together fractured relationships. Community reconciliation workshops were held in villages once divided by political loyalties or sectarian strife. Youth centers offered training in democratic

[1] UNDP, *Reviving Civil Society in Post-Conflict Syria*, 2024.

[2] Jusoor Center for Studies, *The Role of Civil Society in Post-Conflict Syria*, 2023.

participation, journalism, and digital literacy. Women's collectives focused on economic empowerment and legal education, equipping a new generation of female leaders to take part in public life. Through their efforts, civil society groups were not only service providers but also key architects of Syria's post-conflict identity—one based on participation, accountability, and shared citizenship.[3]

Central to this national revival was the transformation of Syria's education system. For decades, schools had been tools of indoctrination, glorifying the ruling family and enforcing an ideology of obedience and fear. The transitional Ministry of Education dismantled this legacy. In its place, a new curriculum was introduced, centered on democratic values, human rights, critical thinking, and inclusive national identity.[4] It taught students to appreciate Syria's cultural and religious diversity, respect the rule of law, and see themselves as active citizens rather than passive subjects.

Special attention was paid to war-affected children and youth. Years of trauma, displacement, and disruption had left deep psychological scars. Many had lost family members, missed years of schooling, or grown up surrounded by violence. To address this, schools introduced trauma-informed teaching methods, while community centers—often in partnership with UNICEF and UNESCO—offered counseling, recreational activities, and catch-up education programs.[5] Teachers were retrained to provide not only instruction but emotional support and mentorship, helping students process their experiences and imagine a better future.

Beyond classrooms and civic halls, the spirit of renewal extended into the cultural sphere. Syria's artists, musicians, poets, and performers—many of whom had been silenced, exiled, or driven underground—returned to the public stage. Cultural festivals were held in Damascus, Aleppo, and Idlib under the motto "Syria Belongs to All of Us." These festivals celebrated Syria's rich heritage and gave voice to

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[3] Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, *National Identity and Democratic Transition in Syria*, 2024.

[4] Syrian Educational Network, *Education Reform in the New Syria*, 2025.

[5] UNICEF, *Education and Child Protection in Syria*, 2025.

communities that had long been sidelined, including Kurds, Druze, Turkmen, and Assyrians. Museums and cultural centers reopened or were established anew, showcasing traditional crafts, literature, and historical narratives that reflected the mosaic of Syrian society.

Youth-led initiatives, especially those harnessing digital platforms and social media, played a dynamic role in shaping the discourse of the new Syria. Art collectives posted murals promoting coexistence. Filmmakers documented personal stories of reconciliation. Podcasts and digital magazines tackled questions of identity, citizenship, and justice.[6] These cultural projects were not only expressions of creativity—they were strategic tools in dismantling the regime's legacy of fear, suspicion, and enforced conformity.

In these early years of transition, Syrians began to recover something that no regime could control or destroy: the power of collective imagination. From refugee camps to rebuilt schools, from grassroots meetings to national cultural festivals, a new Syria was taking shape—not only in institutions and policies, but in the hearts and minds of its people. Civil society was no longer a luxury or an afterthought—it had become the moral compass of the nation.

This chapter in Syria's history was not without its trials. Funding constraints, administrative gaps, and ideological differences occasionally slowed or complicated civil society's work. But the direction was clear. Rebuilding Syria required more than reconstruction—it demanded the cultivation of a new civic culture rooted in pluralism, shared responsibility, and dignity for all.

[6] Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, *Syrian National Identity: Between Challenges and Opportunities*, 2024.

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Part XVII

The Positions of Religious and Ethnic Minorities on the Regime and the Revolution

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The Role of Religious and Ethnic Minorities During the Syrian Revolution

Since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011, the positions of the country's religious and ethnic minorities have varied widely. These responses were shaped by deep-rooted fears, historical experiences, and the complex interplay of regime influence, sectarian anxiety, and geopolitical developments. While many communities initially approached the uprising with skepticism or neutrality—driven by fears of sectarian violence and uncertainty about the opposition's nature—others offered voices of dissent and hope that helped shape the moral fabric of the revolution.

Christian communities, for example, largely oscillated between neutrality and cautious support for the regime. While some individuals joined early protests, fears of jihadist groups like ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra intensified anxieties, especially after targeted attacks on Christian towns and displacement from historically safe regions.[1] The result was a significant demographic decline: from nearly 10% of the population before the war to an estimated 3.3% by 2024.[2] Armenian and Assyrian Christians similarly adopted defensive stances, seeking security in regime-held areas or fleeing the country altogether.[3]

The Druze, particularly concentrated in Suwayda, adopted a cautious stance, focused on communal self-preservation. Prominent figures such

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[1] Hiltermann, Joost. "Minorities and the Syrian Civil War." *The Century Foundation*, 2017.

[2] Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR). *Minority Rights and the Syrian Conflict*, Annual Reports 2012–2024.

[3] Armanian, Nazanín. "The Role of the Armenian Community in the Syrian Conflict." *OpenDemocracy.net*, 2015.

as Sheikh Wahid al-Balous advocated for neutrality and self-defense, criticizing both regime oppression and jihadist violence.[4] His assassination in 2015 deepened Druze mistrust of the regime, and by the later years of the revolution, Suwayda witnessed its own protest movements and calls for reform—signaling a growing appetite for change, albeit outside mainstream revolutionary coalitions.[5]

Alawite communities, closely tied to the ruling family and the military apparatus, largely stood by the regime—motivated by fears of retribution and marginalization.[6] Nevertheless, a small but significant number of Alawite dissidents broke with the regime, most notably the writer Samar Yazbek.[7] These voices—though often dismissed by regime loyalists as traitors—represented early efforts to build bridges and emphasize shared national interests.

The Ismaʿili community, concentrated in Salamiyah, initially participated in peaceful protests calling for reform, only to withdraw into neutrality as the conflict turned violent. Their secular and civic orientation helped insulate them from sectarian polarization, though they too suffered displacement and repression.[8]

Syria's Kurdish population, long denied cultural rights and citizenship, saw the revolution as an opportunity to assert political autonomy. While some Kurdish factions coordinated with opposition groups, the dominant Kurdish political forces focused on building self-administration structures in northeastern Syria.[9] This position of strategic

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[4] International Crisis Group. *Keeping the Druze Out of Syria's War*, Middle East Report No. 164, February 2016.

[5] Jusoor Center for Studies. *Minorities in Syria: Reality and Participation after the Revolution*, 2025.

[6] Donati, Caroline. *The Syrian Awakening: Bashar al-Asad and the Failure of Reform*. CERI Sciences Po, 2013.

[7] Yazbek, Samar. *The Crossing: My Journey to the Shattered Heart of Syria*. Rider Books, 2015.

[8] Kawakibi, Salam. "The Paradox of Minorities in the Syrian Revolution." *Arab Reform Initiative*, 2012.

[9] Phillips, Christopher. *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*. Yale University Press, 2016.

independence allowed Kurdish regions to resist both regime forces and jihadist militias, though it also created tension with some revolutionary actors who saw the Kurds as ambivalent toward the broader Syrian cause.[10]

Despite these varied positions, segments of minority youth and intellectuals played an outsized role in challenging regime narratives and communal fears. From the earliest days of the uprising, young Alawite, Christian, Druze, Ismaʿili, and Kurdish activists joined protests, created independent media, and promoted messages of pluralism and civic unity. Figures like Samar Yazbek and the late Michel Kilo stood as moral beacons for a vision of Syria that embraced diversity and rejected both dictatorship and extremism.[11] These individuals often faced fierce backlash from within their communities—accused of betrayal or naïveté—but their legacy endures as a reminder of what the revolution aspired to be at its best.

A major factor shaping minority behavior throughout the revolution was the regime's relentless propaganda campaign, which framed the uprising as a Sunni Islamist insurrection bent on exterminating minorities.[12] This narrative, repeated through state-controlled media and religious institutions, struck a powerful chord in communities already anxious about regional instability. Many remembered the fate of minorities in Iraq after the U.S. invasion, reinforcing the regime's warnings. The result was a rally-around-the-flag effect that kept many minority groups politically passive or even complicit—more out of fear of the alternative than love for the regime.

However, these narratives began to fracture as the regime's position weakened and its brutality escalated. After 2018, and especially after the regime's collapse in December 2024, many minorities began to

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[10] Yazigi, Jihad. "Syria's War Economy." *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 2014.

[11] Balanche, Fabrice. *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018.

[12] UN Human Rights Council. *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, various annual reports 2011–2024.

reexamine their assumptions and reassess their roles in shaping Syria's future.

In the post-Assad era, minority participation in public life entered a new and hopeful phase. The transitional government's emphasis on inclusive governance invited minority representatives to contribute to constitutional dialogue, national reconciliation, and civic renewal.[13] Civil society organizations led by or serving minority groups flourished in places like Qamishli, Suwayda, Homs, and Aleppo, promoting dialogue, coexistence, and the protection of religious and cultural freedoms. Youth initiatives, cultural forums, and interfaith gatherings became new spaces where Syria's diverse communities could envision a shared national identity rooted in equal citizenship, not sectarian division.

Ultimately, the experience of Syria's minorities during the revolution reveals a complex and often painful struggle between fear and hope. Some communities remained neutral or regime-aligned for survival, while others produced voices of reform and unity that challenged dominant narratives. As Syria enters a new chapter, these communities are no longer silent observers—they are active participants in forging a new social contract that values pluralism, justice, and national belonging for all.

[13] Jusoor Center for Studies. *Minorities in Syria: Reality and Participation after the Revolution*, 2025.

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The Role of Minorities After the Revolution's Victory

The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime on December 18, 2024, marked a pivotal turning point in Syrian history. While the revolution was driven by a broad, cross-sectarian popular uprising, the post-revolution period required renewed efforts to unify a deeply fragmented society. Among the most critical components of this reconstruction process was redefining the relationship between the new Syrian state and its religious and ethnic minorities.

The positions of these communities varied, shaped by their experiences during the revolution, the extent of their association with the former regime, and the constitutional, security, and political guarantees provided by the transitional government. What emerged in the months following Assad's ouster was a landscape of cautious optimism, active engagement, and, in some cases, deep soul-searching. Below is a detailed assessment of the key minority responses as of mid-2025.

Christians

Christians across Syria—Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant—largely greeted the fall of the Assad regime with measured relief. While many had been wary of the revolution's trajectory due to the rise of extremist factions during the war years, the formation of a transitional government committed to civil rights, religious freedom, and inclusive governance helped alleviate long-standing fears. The appointment of Christian representatives to key committees—particularly within the National Conference on Rebuilding the State—served as a symbolic affirmation of their place in the new Syria.

Nevertheless, concerns remain, especially in rural areas that had previously witnessed attacks by jihadist groups. The continued presence

of local Christian councils and their active participation in reconstruction, education, and reconciliation initiatives signal a general trend of conditional support for the new order—anchored in legal protections and civic inclusion.[1]

Druze

The Druze community in Suwayda has emerged as one of the most politically active yet internally divided groups in post-Assad Syria. While historically known for their cautious neutrality and community self-defense during the revolution, the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 brought their role and stance into sharper focus—especially as debates over national integration, decentralization, and religious autonomy intensified.

At the center of the Druze position is Shaykh Hikmat al-Hijrī, the highest spiritual authority for Syria's Druze. Al- Hijrī has firmly rejected the legitimacy of the new Damascus government, calling it "extremist in every sense of the word."[2] He declared that there is "no understanding or agreement with the current regime," and demanded that any future engagement be preceded by internationally supervised national dialogue and constitutional guarantees that uphold religious freedoms, decentralization, and the secular character of the state.[3] He also denounced the post-Assad constitutional declaration as "illogical" and warned that Druze participation would be withheld until their conditions were met.[4]

However, this uncompromising stance has not gone uncontested within the community. A number of Druze leaders, local activists, and elements of the Rijāl al-Karāmah (Men of Dignity) movement have adopted a more pragmatic approach. These factions began engaging with

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[1] Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, *Pluralism and National Integration in Post-War Syria*, 2024.
[2] Rudaw English, "Syria's Top Druze Cleric: Damascus Regime Is Extremist," March 2025.
[3] The New Arab, "Druze Leader Says No Agreement with 'Radical' Syria Government," March 2025.
[4] North Press Agency, "Syria's Druze Leader Refuses to Recognize New Damascus Authority," March 2025.

the transitional government to negotiate limited forms of cooperation—such as recognizing civil offices, managing security coordination, and exploring frameworks for eventual integration—while still advocating for Druze rights and local autonomy.[5]

This internal split became more evident with the creation of the Suwayda Military Council in early 2025. Though broadly aligned with Druze spiritual leadership, the council declared its commitment to secularism, self-rule, and defense of Druze territories, while rejecting any incorporation of HTS (Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham)-linked forces into Syria's official security or political structures.[6] The formation of this council symbolized a dual path: resistance to centralized control from Damascus, coupled with a proactive effort to safeguard the community's identity, security, and political future.[7]

Public manifestations of these divisions include widespread protests in Suwayda, the occupation of government buildings by Druze militias, and symbolic acts of resistance such as raising the Druze flag in defiance of the central authority.[8] Meanwhile, other Druze voices have sought constructive dialogue with interim officials, hoping to shape the constitutional process from within.[9]

In summary, the Druze position in the post-Assad era reflects a complex interplay of spiritual leadership, political activism, and community protection. While Shaykh al- Hijrī maintains a firm rejection of the new government and demands comprehensive reform before engagement, other factions within the Druze community see cautious participation as a strategic path toward securing a place in Syria's new political landscape.[10]

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[5] Syrian Transitional Council – Official Statements, 2025.

[6] Wikipedia, "Suwayda Military Council," accessed July 2025.

[7] Syrian Center for Strategic Studies, *Map of Communities After Assad's Fall*, March 2025.

[8] Al-Modon Newspaper Reports, Jan–Apr 2025.

[9] Syrian Dialogue Center, *Minority Perspectives on Post-Assad Syria*, Feb 2025.

[10] The Syrian government forces engaged in fierce fight with the Hijri's forces and entered Suwayda today, July 15, 2025. More details emerge every minute as these words are being written.

Alawites

Perhaps no community faced a more difficult reckoning than the Alawites. Tied—often unwillingly—to the regime's security and military apparatus, the community bore a heavy toll during the war. Tens of thousands of young Alawite men died in service to Assad's army, while many others grew disillusioned with the regime's use of sectarian fear as a political weapon.

In the wake of the regime's fall, a number of prominent Alawite figures emerged to call for national reconciliation, acknowledging the damage done by the state and advocating for integration into a pluralistic future. Grassroots initiatives in Latakia and Tartus have aimed to reframe the Alawite role—not as a power bloc, but as a community ready to participate in a new Syria based on citizenship and justice. Still, internal divisions persist. While younger Alawites tend to embrace change, older generations remain wary, shaped by decades of state dependency and fear-based propaganda.[11]

Ismāʿīlīs

The Ismāʿīlī community, centered in Salamiyah, was among the earliest and most consistent proponents of peaceful change. Having long emphasized intellectualism and civic culture, Ismāʿīlī youth and elders played quiet but significant roles during the revolution—especially in civil society and media documentation.

After Assad's fall, they emerged as vocal supporters of transitional justice, religious freedom, and legal pluralism. Their participation in the Truth and Justice Commission and their efforts in educational reform demonstrate a commitment to national recovery that exceeds their numerical size.[12] Their support for the new state remains strong, particularly as long as it maintains its nonsectarian character.

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[11] SIRAJ, Field Reports from Latakia and Tartus, 2025.

[12] UNDP Syria, *Inclusive Governance After Conflict*, 2025.

Kurds

The Kurdish population, primarily in the northeast, had by 2012 already begun to establish autonomous governance structures in the form of the "Autonomous Administration." While their relationship with both the Assad regime and opposition factions remained complex throughout the war, the post-2024 period opened a new chapter of dialogue.

Negotiations between the Kurdish leadership and the Syrian Transitional Council have focused on decentralization, recognition of cultural and linguistic rights, and representation in national institutions.[13] Tensions do exist—particularly in contested areas such as Raqqa and parts of Aleppo—but mutual political will has led to significant progress. Kurdish participation in the constitutional process is now framed within a vision of a decentralized, united Syria, where self-rule coexists with shared sovereignty.

Armenians and Assyrians

Both of these ancient Christian communities suffered acutely during the war, especially in areas where ISIS and other extremist groups operated. The fall of the regime and the stabilization of previously dangerous areas have allowed many to return and rebuild. Cultural and religious institutions have reopened, and representatives from both groups have joined local and national forums advocating for minority rights and protections.[14]

Their political demands center around cultural preservation, education in their native languages, and guaranteed representation in regional councils. So far, the transitional government has responded positively, granting special provisions in cultural legislation and ensuring access to reconstruction funds for affected communities.[15]

Toward an Inclusive Syrian Future

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[13] Syrian Transitional Council – *Decentralization Dialogue Papers*, 2025.

[14] Wall Street Journal, "Deadly Attacks on Syria's Small Druze Community," March 2025.

[15] Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), Annual Reports 2024–2025.

Across all minority groups, a few shared themes have emerged as the pillars of support for the post-revolution state:

- **Equal Citizenship**: A strong insistence that no Syrian be treated differently based on religion, ethnicity, or sect.
- **Legal Guarantees**: A demand for binding constitutional protections, not just political promises.
- **Civic Representation**: Active participation in public life—not merely symbolic representation—in governance, civil society, and transitional justice processes.
- **Protection from Extremism**: Continued vigilance against any return of extremist forces that threaten Syria's diversity.

Ultimately, while Syria's minorities suffered immense losses during the war—both material and psychological—they have demonstrated resilience and a growing readiness to help shape the country's future. The Syrian revolution, long mischaracterized by its enemies as a sectarian uprising, is now increasingly recognized—by minorities and majorities alike—as a national movement for justice, dignity, and inclusive citizenship.

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Part XVIII

The Counteroffensive: The Battle to Repel the Aggression (Dec. 2024)

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Details of the Battle

The opposition factions in the north, particularly in Idlib and Aleppo, launched the "**Operation to Repel the Aggression"** on November 27, which led to the liberation of Aleppo within three days. The factions seized a massive stockpile of weapons and ammunition from collapsing regime positions, accelerating the advance toward Damascus.

On December 1, opposition factions announced the beginning of the final stage of the liberation plan, amid the collapse of regime defenses in both the south and the north.

Detailed Timeline of *Operation to Repel the Aggression*

(November 27 – December 8, 2024)

Date	Event	Details
November 27 (Wednesday)	Operation launched	Opposition factions, led by *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* and the *Fath al-Mubin* Operations Room, launched a large-scale offensive in the Idlib and western Aleppo countryside. They captured 32 positions on the first day, including villages in Jabal al-Zawiya and Khan al-Asal.
November 28 (Thursday)	Capture of Regiment 46 and Khan al-Asal	The opposition took control of Regiment 46 headquarters and cut off the international M5 highway between Aleppo and Damascus. Iranian commander "Haj Hashem" (Kioumars Pourhashemi) was killed in Aleppo.

Date	Event	Details
November 29 (Friday)	Entry into Aleppo city	Regime defenses in Aleppo collapsed. The opposition seized most of the city's districts, including al-Sulaymaniyah, al-Shaʿar, and al-Ansari.
November 30 – December 2	Expanded operations	The opposition advanced toward Homs and Hama. Reports emerged of regime forces withdrawing from strategic positions without significant resistance.
December 3 (Tuesday)	Liberation of Homs	The city was fully secured, including the central prison. Public celebrations took place in the square of Khalid ibn al-Walid Mosque.
December 4 (Wednesday)	Advance toward Hama	The opposition captured towns in Hama's countryside and began besieging the city.
December 5 (Thursday)	Fall of Hama	The city was seized, including the 11th Division headquarters and Hama Military Airport.
December 6 (Friday)	Isolation of the coast	The capture of al-Qusayr cut off the coastal provinces (Latakia and Tartus) from inland Syria.
December 7 (Saturday)	Capture of Daraa	The opposition entered Daraa without resistance. Regime forces withdrew from rural Damascus. The statue of Hafez al-Assad in Jaramana Square was toppled.
December 8 (Sunday)	Entry into Damascus and fall of the regime	At dawn, opposition forces entered Damascus, seizing the Presidential Palace, the Ministry of Defense, the General Staff Command, and Umayyad Square. Bashar al-Assad fled the capital. The official fall of the regime was declared.

Objectives of the Operation

- Break the frontlines that had persisted since the March 2020 ceasefire agreement.
- Respond to regime massacres, including the bombing of a Qur'an memorization institute in Idlib.
- Cut the regime's military supply route (M5).
- Return the displaced to their homes and secure the liberated areas.

Main Participating Factions

- Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
- National Liberation Front
- Ahrar al-Sham Movement
- Jaysh al-ʿIzza
- Saraya al-Harari
- Northern Storm Brigade
- Sultan Murad Division

The *Battle to Repel the Aggression* became a decisive turning point after the fall of the regime, proving the Syrians' ability to defend the revolution's gains in the face of foreign aggression and sectarian militias. Thanks to coordinated field operations, broad popular support, and organized movements, victory was achieved in just six days, confirming that the revolution remained alive and capable of safeguarding the nation's freedom and future.

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Al Jazeera provides detailed mapping of rebel gains and the strategic momentum shift.(en.wikipedia.org)

Reuters, **The Guardian**, **The Associated Press**, and others confirm the regime's collapse, Assad's flight to Russia, and the transformation to interim governance.(cfr.org)

International Crisis Group labels the offensive the "Deterrence of Aggression," driven by motives to safeguard civilian-held territories.(en.wikipedia.org)

wsj.com

theguardian.com

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The Fall of Damascus – December 8, 2024

It was still dark over Damascus on that cold December morning. The call to prayer had not yet risen when the rumble of armored vehicles and the distant crack of gunfire rolled across the sleeping city. By sunrise, the skyline was no longer the same — columns of smoke twisted above the old minarets, and the sound of boots echoed in the streets where the al-Assad dynasty had ruled unchallenged for over half a century.

This was the day Syrians had been dreaming of — the day the capital would breathe free air.

The Eve of Liberation – December 7, 2024

The day before, opposition commanders had ordered the iron ring around Damascus to be sealed shut. From the north, south, and east, towns fell like dominos: al-Sanamayn, only 20 kilometers away, was the final key to the southern approach. Regime garrisons in ʿAssal al-Ward, Yabrud, Flita, al-Nasiriyah, al-Ruhaybah, and ʿArtuz abandoned their posts without a fight.

By evening, the collapse was visible. Soldiers stripped their uniforms in Qatana and Darayya; armored units withdrew from al-Kiswah and Muʿadhdhamiyyah al-Sham. Even the heavily guarded approaches to Mezzeh Military Airport were left exposed.

Then came the moment that signaled the regime's fate: in Jaramana Square, the bronze statue of Hafez al-Assad was pulled down to the cheers of a swelling crowd. Its fall struck deeper than the sound of gunfire — it was the sound of a nation's chains breaking. Protests erupted in the suburbs, their chants carrying through the night and hastening the army's retreat.

Dawn – December 8, 2024

Before the first light touched Mount Qasioun, the opposition poured into the city. From the east, they entered through the battered streets of Harasta. From the south, the columns pushed in via Muʿadhdhamiyyah and Darayya. From the north, fighters surged forward after seizing Palmyra, cutting off the last regime supply lines.

They moved quickly, striking at the heart of the state:

- The People's Palace was taken before sunrise.
- The Ministry of Defense fell within the hour.
- The General Staff Headquarters was overrun, its command center eerily silent.
- The state-run Radio and Television Building, once the voice of propaganda, was secured.
- By mid-morning, both Umayyad Square and Abbasid Square — symbols of the regime's grip on Damascus — were under the revolution's flag.

Somewhere in those early hours, Bashar al-Assad slipped out of the capital. His convoy vanished into the uncertainty beyond Damascus, leaving behind a government that no longer existed.

Afternoon – The End of an Era

By midday, Ahmad al-Sharʿ, commander of *Operation to Repel the Aggression*, arrived in Damascus. His first act was to call regime Prime Minister Muhammad al-Jallali, asking him to remain in office temporarily — not as a sign of legitimacy, but to ensure a smooth political transition and prevent chaos in the streets.

On December 9, in a quiet but historic meeting, al-Sharʿ and al-Jallali sat face to face with Muhammad al-Bashir, head of the National Salvation Government. They agreed on a phased handover of power. The following day, files began to change hands — not between two rival governments, but from the old Syria to the new.

A Nation Reborn

The fall of Damascus was more than a military triumph; it was a moment when history itself turned a page. For the first time since 1970, the capital was free of the Assad grip. In its streets, people wept, embraced, and waved the flags of the revolution. The statue of Hafez al-Assad lay in pieces — not just metal shattered, but a symbol of fear finally broken.

It was the end of one Syria and the birth of another.

The World Reacts

The world watched in shock at the speed of the regime's collapse.

- The Gulf States — Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait recognized the Transitional National Council within hours and called for an emergency Arab summit to reinstate Syria's seat in the Arab League.
- Türkiye — Declared full support for the new Syrian state, opening direct communication with the transitional government and offering help in reconstruction and border security.
- United States & Europe — Hailed it as "the victory of the Syrian people," calling for the protection of minorities, an inclusive government, and justice for war crimes.
- Russia — Spoke cautiously, saying it "understood the changes" but insisting on "protecting its interests and those of Syria's minorities."
- Iran — Fell silent for days before issuing a vague statement about "reassessing the situation in the region."

On that December day, the sun set over a Damascus no longer bound by the shadow of one family's rule. And as night fell, the city's lights burned with a different glow — the glow of a people who had taken back their capital.

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Part XIX

Israel and the New Syria

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Will Israel Be the Next Adversary?

From Regime Collapse to the Next Frontier

When Bashar al-Assad's rule collapsed on December 8, 2024, the liberated Syrian state inherited a moment of jubilation — and a set of questions it could no longer postpone. Victory had been won in Damascus, but the map of threats had not changed. The new government faced a strategic dilemma: how to guard the revolution's borders, and how to reclaim Syria's regional role without falling into the trap of endless war.

To the south, one challenge stood above all others: the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Since 1967, it had been the unfinished chapter in the Syrian national story — a wound dressed, but never healed. For decades, its recovery had been deferred by a regime that hid behind slogans, maintaining a "quiet front" with Israel in exchange for its own survival. Now, with the old bargain gone, the question of the Golan returned with urgency.

The new Syria could no longer treat it as a footnote. In the post-Assad political order, it became a pillar of the emerging national contract, a litmus test for sovereignty, and a symbol of whether the revolution's promises would extend beyond removing a dictator.

The Golan's Half-Century of Silence

From the 1974 disengagement agreement until the last days of 2023, the Golan front remained an anomaly in the Middle East — almost fifty years without a major exchange of fire. The UNDOF monitors patrolled a line that reached deep into Syrian territory, but the calm was not born of mutual respect or deterrence. It was an unspoken arrangement: in Tel Aviv's eyes, Hafez and Bashar al-Assad were "neighbors who kept their word," in Ehud Barak's phrase, "an enemy one can live with."

This silence collapsed with the revolution. As the Assad regime lost its legitimacy, the unwritten pact lost its guarantor. By the time Damascus fell, the idea of "reclaiming the Golan" had shifted from a romantic slogan to a concrete item on the new Syria's security agenda.

Israel's Strategic Recalculation

Jerusalem's defense planners quickly realized that post-2024 Syria was not a weaker version of the old regime. It was something different — unpredictable, ideologically motivated, and no longer dependent on foreign patrons in the way Assad had been.

Israeli assessments identified four sources of concern:

1. **Renewed Golan Claims** – The transitional government's Charter of Principles committed the state to recover the Heights by political or military means.
2. **Potential Support for Palestinian Resistance** – Syrian factions signaled readiness to open logistical corridors once Iranian influence was gone.
3. **Intelligence Blind Spots** – Assad-era networks had collapsed, forcing Israel to rely on drones, sensors, and coordination with Washington and Ankara.
4. **Guerrilla-War Risk** – Opposition units brought years of urban warfare experience and guided missile arsenals to the southern front.

An Israeli think tank put it bluntly in 2025:

"This new enemy has revolutionary legitimacy. It is far harder to deter than an authoritarian regime seeking international protection."

The New Syria's Capabilities

The post-revolution military landscape is a hybrid of conventional forces and popular defense structures:

- **National Army** – 120,000 to 140,000 troops, organized into mobile brigades with strong anti-tank and anti-air capacity.

- **Local Defense Forces** – 20,000 fighters in Daraa and Quneitra, intimately familiar with the land and skilled in ambush tactics.
- **Technology Gap** – No matching air power yet, pushing investment toward portable air defenses and kamikaze drones.
- **Regional Position** – Warmer ties with Jordan and the Gulf offer political and financial depth, while Türkiye's desire for border calm positions it as a possible mediator.

Possible Paths to 2028

Strategists in Damascus and abroad map four plausible scenarios:

1. **Diplomatic Campaign** – Building Arab and international consensus to reverse the 2019 U.S. recognition of Israel's annexation of the Golan.
2. **Low-Intensity Deterrence** – A Lebanese-style standoff with limited infiltration and reinforced UN patrols.
3. **Controlled Escalation** – Tit-for-tat strikes kept below the threshold of regional war.
4. **Full-Scale War** – Considered unlikely before 2030, given Syria's focus on reconstruction.

The "Incremental Liberation" Doctrine

The transitional government has signaled that the Golan battle will be measured in years, not weeks:

- **Build First, Fight Later** – Human development and economic recovery are framed as prerequisites for sustainable deterrence.
- **Use the Law and Opinion** – Linking the Golan cause to war crimes, water theft, and settlement illegality in global forums, especially in the West where sympathy for the revolution is still fresh.
- **Measured Retaliation** – Any Israeli attack would trigger a proportional, precise response on military targets in the Golan — avoiding civilian harm to preserve Syria's moral standing.

Conclusion – An Adversary, Not an Obsession

Israel will remain Syria's central test of sovereignty, but not in the propagandistic sense cultivated by the old regime. The challenge now is to end Israel's era of "comfortable peace" without sabotaging the revolution's deeper goal — a free, stable, and prosperous Syria.

If Damascus can maintain internal cohesion, calibrate its responses, and keep its eyes on the Golan without losing focus on reconstruction, it will have reshaped the conflict into something unprecedented: a patient, calculated contest of endurance in which victory is measured not by a single battle, but by the survival and strength of the Syrian state itself.

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Why Does Israel View Revolutionary Syria as a Strategic Threat?

Since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in March 2011, Israel maintained a calculated silence. The regime that brandished the slogan of "resistance" in fact preserved the quietest border the Jewish state had known since the signing of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement (May 1974) — not a single shot was fired from the Syrian side for nearly half a century.

1. Manufactured Enmity Beneficial to Both Sides

Tel Aviv continued to regard Bashar al-Assad as "the enemy one can deal with." He kept the border under control, restrained any genuine military move toward the Golan, and allowed Israel to concentrate its resources on other fronts. For this reason, Israeli security agencies preferred his survival over the revolutionary unknown that might revive the demand to recover the Golan by force. This view took practical shape when the Russians and Israelis agreed to establish a "hotline" for aerial coordination after Moscow entered the war in September 2015 — giving Israel freedom to bomb deep inside Syria in return for its silence regarding Russian and regime operations against the opposition.

2. What Is Israel Afraid Of?

Israel fears three developments occurring together if the new Syrian state succeeds in establishing itself:

Immediate Cause	What Makes It Different This Time	Fear
A transitional government with popular legitimacy will revive the political and military claim to the Golan	The claim would come in the name of a revolution that made huge sacrifices, not in the name of an old deterrence-based regime	Return of the Golan file
The revolution distances itself from the Iranian axis, yet does not abandon Palestine	Liberation-oriented support without sectarian ceilings or political blackmail	Support for the Palestinian and Lebanese resistance
Spread of revolutionary factions and seasoned local cells in Daraa and Quneitra	Fighters experienced in battling both regular armies and ISIS, not amateur militias	Turning the southern front into a live front

The Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv noted these possibilities and concluded that the main threat is not Syria's post-war capabilities, but the legitimacy of its national narrative.

3. How Has Israel Acted on the Ground?

- **2012–2015:** When rebels advanced near the Golan, Israel launched strikes on some of their positions under the pretext of "preventing jihadist infiltration," though UN reports documented, conversely, that it provided medical treatment and logistical support to local factions hostile to Assad but not hostile to Israel, according to *The Christian Science Monitor*.[1]

[1] From the perspective of many Syrian revolutionaries, Israel's treatment of some wounded fighters in 2014 was a step surrounded by suspicion and interpretation, but it was not necessarily considered an expression of normalization or alliance. According to the Syrian Revolution Coordinators Union, the medical evacuations were overseen by teams from the International Committee of the Red Cross, which had set up field hospitals near the border in the occupied Golan. In this account, Israel was not voluntarily providing treatment but was compelled to facilitate these operations under international agreements — and often obstructed them. Moreover, the rebels in southern

- **Since 2015:** Focused airstrikes on Iranian and Hezbollah infrastructure, while avoiding weakening regime forces to the point of collapse — in line with the adage that "Assad is the lesser evil."[2]
- **Late 2024:** After Assad fled, media reports spoke of limited Israeli incursions into the Golan demilitarized zone under the pretext of "preventing chaos."[3]

4. A Generation That Cannot Be Contained

The revolution has produced a generation that fought the regime, Russia, Iran, and ISIS alike, while at the same time building local councils and community projects under bombardment. This generation does not see the Golan as a "negotiating dilemma" but as a matter of national honor, recoverable through diplomatic, popular, or even military means

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Syria recorded no breaches of the ceasefire toward Israel, considering that confrontation with the "occupier" was postponed until after the fall of the Syrian regime. This position reflects battlefield pragmatism more than political rapprochement.

Some Western reports, such as those published by *Foreign Policy*, spoke of an "implicit agreement" between the Israeli army and certain armed factions near the Golan, involving the exchange of intelligence information and the transfer of wounded for treatment. This claim stirred considerable controversy, but it was never officially confirmed by the revolutionary factions, which often denied the existence of direct coordination. Given the difficulty of reaching Jordan or other safe areas, the wounded were taken to the nearest point where treatment could be provided — even if it was under Israeli control. Some revolutionaries saw saving fighters' lives as not necessarily implying political acceptance or normalization. In other words, the rebels treated these cases as a field and humanitarian necessity, not as a strategic choice or alliance. The stance of the Israeli occupier after the revolution's victory and the fall of Assad's regime will, in the eyes of the rebels, expose Israel's true intentions toward Syria and its new leadership — and serve as a rebuttal to those who accused the revolutionaries of collaborating with Israel.

[2] Zoe Hu, "Why Bashar al-Assad is Still in Power?" Al Jazeera Net, October 4, 2016.

[3] Aluf Benn, "Syria Has Always Been An Israeli Obsession," *The Guadian*, December 20, 2024; Wikipedia: "Israeli-Syrian ceasefire line incidents during the Syrian civil war."

if necessary. Here lies the fragility of the "Israeli security" doctrine, which long assumed that Damascus would remain a guardian of a quiet border.

Conclusion

Will Israel be "the next enemy" of revolutionary Syria? It is not inevitable that the new Damascus will rush into a conventional war while still nursing its wounds, but it is certain that the old deterrence equation is over. The Golan has returned to the forefront of national consciousness, and Syrians who liberated their country with their own hands will not accept its continued occupation without a price. For Tel Aviv, this is an existential threat born of popular legitimacy more than an immediate military danger — which explains why its security circles have been on alert from the very first moment of the revolution's victory.

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Israel's Fear of Revolutionary Syria

From a "Permanent Truce" Regime to a Revolutionary State

Since the signing of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement in 1974, the front in the occupied Golan remained completely quiet — not a single shot was fired from the Syrian side for the next two decades. This led Israel to view the Assad regime as "an enemy that can be managed" rather than as a trigger for open confrontation.[1]

The repeated statements by Israeli officials that they preferred Assad to the possibility of extremist Islamists taking control reflect an analysis that Assad was "the known enemy" compared to the uncertain outcomes of the revolution.[2]

According to analysts, in the early stages of the revolution, Israel preferred the survival of Assad as a weakened regime, distanced from the Iranian project yet still capable of controlling the border — in order to avoid the scenario of total state collapse in Syria.[3]

Fear of a New Syria with a National Liberation Project

Post-revolution Syria has changed fundamentally. It is no longer a state captive to a closed security regime; rather — from Tel Aviv's perspective — it now poses the threat of reshaping a revolutionary nationalist doctrine that regards the liberation of Palestine as a central cause.

The success of a popular revolution in Syria against an authoritarian regime backed by global powers such as Russia and Iran sent a powerful

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[1] Wikipedia – *Israel and the Syrian civil war.*

[2] Haaretz, *Israel Prefers Assad to Chaos in Syria*, 18 May 2013.

[3] Vision Centre, *An Analysis of Israeli Positions on the Fall of Assad's Regime*, Dec 2024

message to the region: "Popular will can prevail." This is a frightening prospect for the Zionist entity, which relies on a weakened and fragmented regional environment.

The new leadership in Damascus — born from the womb of the revolution — could adopt a genuine resistance strategy, not merely slogans. Its inclination to ally with resistance movements in Palestine and Lebanon, outside the confines of traditional regional and international axes, would make it a thorn in Israel's side.

The Occupied Golan… A Delayed Explosion

One of Israel's greatest sources of concern is the possibility of the occupied Golan returning to the forefront of the conflict. Israel formally annexed the Golan in 1981 — a step recognized only by the Trump administration in 2019.

The fall of the Assad regime, which had effectively "frozen" the Golan issue for decades, opens the door to active demands for its return. The new Syria might resort to popular, legal, or even military resistance to reclaim the Golan, relying on the regional and international popular support it has gained as a result of its sacrifices during the revolution.[4]

Change in Military Doctrine

One of the most dangerous effects of the revolution on Israel is the emergence of a new Syrian military generation untainted by the doctrine of defeat and retreat, but equipped with high combat experience.

This generation, which resisted the most ferocious Russian, Iranian, and Assad offensives, now understands that victory is possible through preparation, planning, and popular mobilization. They are more independent from traditional regional alliances and are not beholden to Iranian or Russian decision-making.

This generation is the nucleus of a new national army that could become a genuine military threat to Israel if the revolutionary forces unite and a strong state is built.[5]

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[4] Times of Israel, *Israel prefers Assad to Islamist rebels*, May 2013.
[5] International Crisis Group, *How Israel's Overreach in Syria May Backfire*, Mar 2025

The Popular and Islamic Factor

The Syrian revolution had a clear Islamic dimension, especially in its advanced stages. This raises Israeli fears of a revival of the "Islamic spirit" that moves peoples toward rejecting occupation and demanding the liberation of al-Aqsa Mosque.

The link between Damascus and Jerusalem in revolutionary discourse has become strong, reviving conflict dynamics that Israel has sought to bury since the 1990s.

The Islamic and revolutionary compass has influenced the Syrian people, particularly in political rhetoric connecting Damascus to Jerusalem — reminding Israel that Palestinian popular resistance might find an echo in the new Syria.[6]

Conclusion

Israel fears "post-Assad Syria" because it:

- Ends the era of the "quiet front" and returns the initiative to Damascus.
- Could become a popular renaissance model emulated regionally.
- Possesses an independent resistance project not subordinate to any state or regional bloc.
- Holds the means to reopen the Golan file at political and operational levels.

For this reason, according to analyses in *Haaretz* and *Middle East Eye*, Tel Aviv preferred the survival of Assad as a manageable regime over a head-on confrontation with an unpredictable revolutionary leadership.

[6] Middle East Eye, *Israel after Assad: Why vow to 'protect' the Druze is hollow*, Jul 2025.

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The Golan Heights and the New Syria – A Cause Rekindled

From Slogans to Strategy

For decades, the occupied Golan Heights formed a silent front—a symbol of Syria's lost sovereignty and fractured national dignity. Since its occupation in 1967 during the Six-Day War, and Israel's subsequent annexation in 1981 (an act nullified by UN Security Council Resolution 497), this land remained largely forgotten in Syria's official discourse, used more as an empty slogan than as a genuine strategic objective. Under Hafez al-Assad, and later Bashar, not a single shot was fired from the southern front after the 1974 disengagement agreement. For Israel, this was an ideal situation: a stable, predictable regime that posed no real threat and served as a security buffer. But with the regime's fall in December 2024, the reality changed entirely. The new Syria—led by a popular transitional authority—restored the Golan's prominence in the media, education, and cultural initiatives.[1]

Reviving the Cause of National Sovereignty

When the revolution began in 2011, regaining the Golan was not among its priorities. Yet, after a shift in sovereign consciousness, it became clear that internal liberation could not be complete without reclaiming the occupied land. With the formation of the new state, an official declaration in January 2025 proclaimed the Golan "a non-

[1] Reuters, "Israel Carries Out Strikes on Two Syrian Cities…" May 2, 2025; Charles Clover, "Can Israe translate power into peace?" *Financial Times*.

negotiable national priority," established a special council, and launched awareness campaigns and civic-cultural initiatives to revive the memory.[2]

Israel's Strategic Maneuver

The collapse of the previous regime left Israel facing a new, unpredictable neighbor. The old regime had ensured quiet; the revolutionary Syria is a people's state, speaking in the name of its citizens, unwilling to trade land for protection or submit to under-the-table deals. Israel realizes that the new threat is not only military but ideological. Syria, which toppled a regime backed by Russia and Iran and held its unity despite deep wounds, can revive an Arab popular consciousness that transcends the borders of Sykes–Picot.

Following the regime's fall, Israel moved to occupy part of the disengagement zone (monitored by the UN), support border militias, and launch airstrikes on southern Syria—interpreted as a preemptive attempt to curb any real momentum toward Golan liberation by the new revolutionary Damascus.[3]

In January 2025, the Syrian transitional government reaffirmed the Golan as "a non-negotiable national priority," formed a dedicated Golan Affairs Committee, and launched awareness campaigns in schools, universities, and cultural centers. Murals depicting the destroyed Golan villages appeared in the squares of Idlib, Daraa, and Aleppo. Inside the occupied Golan itself—where most Druze residents refuse Israeli citizenship—signs of renewed engagement with the emerging Syrian state appeared: documentation campaigns, cultural initiatives, and indications of discreet communication reflecting unity of belonging and identity.

The Legal Track: A Deterrent Option

In March 2025, the revolutionary Syrian government announced it had filed a complaint with the International Court of Justice, citing

[2] Al Jazeer net, "Israel pushes on with strategy to keep neighbours weak in Lebanon and Syria," April, 9, 2025.
[3] Wikipedia: Israeli Invasion of Syria (2024-present)

victims of displacement and settlement, and reasserting the applicability of UN Security Council Resolution 497 rejecting the 1981 annexation. It also held legal consultations with international organizations to prepare a case for global judicial forums.[4] Thus, the Golan issue shifted from a slogan to a legitimate claim backed by international law.

Popular and Cultural Mobilization

The quest to regain the Golan became a living public cause, expressed through documentaries, educational theater and cinema, social media hashtags (#Return_to_the_Golan), and school and university activities in Idlib, Aleppo, and Daraa aimed at embedding the cause in the revolution's collective consciousness.[5] No longer confined to official statements, it became part of the Syrian nation's ethos. Through this movement, the revolutionary state emerged as the custodian of memory and justice—not as a temporary authority.

The New Military Doctrine

In March 2025, the new Military Council adopted a defensive strategy placing the Golan as a line of deterrence rather than a trigger for war. Military leaders, such as Colonel Qasim al-Darni, stressed that defense would be on a national-civil basis, without direct involvement from any external axis, and that the new army is non-sectarian, independent of any outside party, and a truly national force under civilian oversight.[6]

[4] Reuters, "Israel Carries Out Strikes on Two Syrian Cities…" May 2, 2025.
[5] Al Jazeera net, "Israel pushes on with strategy to keep neighbours weak in Lebanon and Syria," April, 9, 2025.
[6] Itai Melchior and Nir Boms, "Why al-Sharra's success in Syra is good for Israel and the US," Atlantic council, July, 2, 2025.

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Syria and the Sunni Resistance Axis

Since the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in late 2024, the region seemed to be reshuffling its cards. The state that for decades had been a pillar of the so-called *Axis of Resistance*—with its lofty slogans and its role as a political and military platform for Iran and its proxies—suddenly exited the orbit of regional dependency. For the first time in decades, Syria's horizon opened to new possibilities, grounded not in inherited alliances but in the will of a victorious people.

The edifice of authoritarian rule collapsed, taking with it the security and ideological structures that had bound Damascus to Tehran. A new state began to emerge, feeling its way through the rubble of shattered cities and the fragments of a torn national memory. Yet from the first moment, it was clear that revolutionary Syria, which had paid such a heavy price in blood for its freedom, would not accept being detached from its great central cause: Palestine.

The Background of Deception – Resistance as a Cover for Hegemony

In the years before the regime's fall, Syria was, on paper, in the "resistance camp." It hosted Palestinian factions, raised slogans of support for the resistance, and took part in the rhetoric of "liberating Jerusalem" at regional forums. In reality, however, it had not fired a single shot at the Israeli enemy since signing the disengagement agreement in 1974.[1] The regime wielded these slogans to shore up its internal legitimacy—not to liberate land or support genuine resistance.

The Palestinian factions that had found refuge in Damascus for years had become more beholden to agendas tied to Tehran than to the

[1] Wikipedia: Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights.

Palestinian field itself. They were transformed from tools of liberation into bargaining chips for regional negotiations, particularly amid escalating sectarian and denominational rifts.

Freedom from Iranian Tutelage

With the birth of a new Syria came a strategic question: Could the coming Syrian state—free from the grip of Iran and Assad's regime—redefine its relationship with the resistance, particularly the Sunni resistance? Could it form a new alliance, independent of traditional regional blocs, grounded in national liberation and popular dignity rather than dependency and sectarian political alignment?

Soon after the regime's fall, early signs suggested the answer could be yes.

In northern and eastern Syria, where temporary civil authorities representing the revolution took shape, unofficial Palestinian delegations visited the region. Initial contacts were made between Syrian revolutionary forces and Palestinian resistance brigades, notably the al-Qassam Brigades and Saraya al-Quds. The meetings were not fully public, but later leaks and statements indicated a shared desire to build a new resistance axis—one that transcends sectarianism and rests on the values of liberation and popular participation.

At the same time, free Syrian media outlets emerged that adopted a new discourse toward Palestine, speaking of resistance not as an ideological slogan but as a people's liberation cause—a natural extension of the Syrians' own experience. Palestine was no longer a prop for extending the life of regimes, but part of a comprehensive liberation project.

The Rise of a Cross-Border Sunni Resistance Axis

This shift resonated within Palestinian circles, especially among factions long isolated in the Arab world, such as al-Qassam and Saraya al-Quds. They saw in revolutionary Syria a natural partner—one that shared their pain and their struggle.

In Lebanon, independent Sunni figures and resistance activists outside Hezbollah's orbit began openly calling for the creation of a cross-

border Sunni resistance front, stretching from Gaza to Sidon and Lebanon's refugee camps, and onward to Daraa and the liberated Syrian south.

These initiatives, however, did not go unchallenged. Israel, along with certain regional governments, viewed such an alliance outside traditional control structures with concern.[2] Even remnants of Iranian influence within some resistance factions posed obstacles to their full engagement with the new Syria.

Yet these movements seemed more aligned with the logic of history than with the logic of politics. Syria, having fought for a decade against tyranny, could not accept being on the margins of the Palestinian cause. And Sunni resistance brigades, which had faced the occupation for years without real regional backing, had finally found a partner who mirrored their background and aspirations.

Will Hamas Return to Damascus?

The first hints of change appeared as early as September 2022, when Hamas announced the resumption of its relations with Syria after a rupture since 2012. The movement justified this as part of "developing firm relations with the Syrian Arab Republic in service of the causes of the ummah."[3]

This announcement stirred significant debate within Hamas and among its grassroots. Some saw it as a capitulation to regional necessities; others viewed it as the start of a new sorting process—between a resistance that followed a sectarian axis and one that returned to its popular Sunni identity.

With Assad gone and the central authority that had governed under Tehran's gaze now absent, certain currents within Hamas began rethinking their positioning, taking cautious steps toward revolutionary Syria rather than regime Syria.

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[2] Joe Macaron, "Israel Returns to Basics in Syria: 'Better the devil you know,'" Arab Center Washington, DC , August 15, 2018.
[3] Mutaz al-Khatib, *Awdat Hamas ilā Dimashq wa Sharʿiyat al-Bayānāt*, Al-Jazeera, September 22, 2022.

Hezbollah After Assad – Eroding Influence and Attempts to Hold On

Meanwhile, Hezbollah has sought to preserve its influence in Syria after Assad's departure, especially in the Qalamoun and Qusayr regions, where its vital supply lines run. A Carnegie Center report noted that the party is working to strengthen its presence in both Syria and Lebanon, capitalizing on the power vacuum and on efforts by some Shia factions to form a multi-sectarian "resistance front."

But the new Syria views these moves with suspicion, seeing the era of tutelage as over. For it, resistance is not built through *Wilayat al-Faqih* or intelligence channels, but through the will of free peoples and the battlefield of liberation.

Challenges Facing the New Axis

Despite cautious optimism, the emerging alliance between revolutionary Syria and independent resistance factions faces serious challenges:

- Ideological differences: Some factions still bear traces of their previous alliances with Iran.
- International pressure: Regional and Western powers seek to dismantle any new resistance axis that lies outside their balance-of-power frameworks.
- Syria's internal situation: Reconstruction, stabilizing civil governance, and rebuilding the national army remain pressing priorities.

Yet despite these challenges, the nascent alliance carries the hallmarks of a distinct liberation project—one rooted in popular participation and national resistance, not in regional or sectarian exploitation.

A Return to the National Role Through the People's Gate

Thus, the coming years may witness Syria's return to its Arab and resistance role—not through the gate of regimes and chemical weapons, but through the gate of popular awareness and the revolutionary field. A

new resistance front may emerge, loyal only to freedom and springing from the homes of the poor and the oppressed, not from the corridors of intelligence agencies. From Daraa to Jerusalem, from Idlib to Gaza, the boundaries of dignity may be redrawn—not in sectarian ink, but in the blood of free peoples.

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From Revolution to Liberation: Is Palestine the Next Phase?

Since the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in late 2024, and Syria's entry into a new phase of political and security reconstruction, questions have arisen in Arab and international political and media circles about the liberated Syria's next direction. These were not idle questions but stemmed from growing indications that the new leadership in Damascus is veering toward a clear nationalist liberation discourse, re-linking Syria with the Arabs' central issue: Palestine.[1]

Syria's Return to Its Natural Place in the Axis of Resistance

Since the 1974 disengagement agreement with Israel, the Golan front experienced a decades-long "suspicious calm," enabling Assad's regime to be seen as a de facto ally by Israel—despite its rhetorical hostility. Under the new revolutionary regime, this calm is now questioned, as calls mount within Syria to redefine ties with the occupation and place the Golan on the national priority list.

Statements by new Syrian leaders signal a real desire to break the previous regime's paralysis—some even declare that *"abandoning the Golan is betrayal of the revolution's principles"*—signaling a major strategic shift.[2]

Evolving Relations with Palestinian Resistance

A major anticipated shift is re-engagement with Palestinian resistance factions—especially Hamas and Islamic Jihad—which have

[1] Al Jazeera, "How have Palestinian groups reacted to the ouster of Syria's al-Assad?", Dec. 9, 2024.
[2] Washington Institute, "Inside the New Syria: The First Three Months," 2025.

gradually moved closer to revolutionary Damascus since 2023, following regional shifts and Assad's fall.[3] Hamas officials made positive statements about "opening a new chapter" with Syria "in service of the nation's cause."[4]

In this context, Damascus is likely to reemerge as a strategic host for resistance groups, within a broader pan-Arab liberation project—not as a political burden.

Rethinking the 1974 Disengagement Agreement

The 1974 agreement remains in effect but functions as a tacit "ceasefire" rather than a peace treaty—providing decades of security for Israel. With the regime change, Syrian political and military leaders are calling to renegotiate or condition the agreement's continuation on Israel's seriousness in ending its occupation of the Golan.

Moreover, Syria's new government may support nonconventional resistance in the Golan—similar to the southern Lebanon model—as part of a long-term "attrition strategy" aimed at imposing costs on the occupier.

Palestinian Cause as a Core Component of New Syrian Identity

Despite the tragedy of the revolution, it has fostered a new political consciousness among younger Syrians who now view Palestine as integral to their struggle.[5]

This consciousness transcends emotional affinity—it translates into political programs, grassroots positions, and organizational expressions of commitment to Palestinian liberation, and rejection of normalization.[6] Since late 2024, revolutionary slogans in protests have included messages like: "From Daraa to Jerusalem… the path is one," "Free Syria supports the liberated Palestine."

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[3] Al Jazeera, op. cit.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Atlantic Council, "The fall of Assad has opened a door…", 2024.

[6] Jadaliyya, "The Collapse of the Syrian Regime," 2024.

International Response and Attempts at Containment

Such liberation-oriented tendencies of the new Syria worry Israel and its allies. Tel Aviv fears that Syria could become a strategic support platform for resistance in Gaza, Lebanon, and the West Bank. Reports from early 2025 show that the U.S. and Western powers warned publicly against Syria becoming a "state of confrontation."[7]

Israeli concerns also triggered intensified communications with certain Arab states—seeking to contain Damascus, urging a focus on "reconstruction" and "economic development" instead of "regional adventures."[8]

From Internal Revolution to External Liberation

The contours of the new Syrian project are clear: a free, independent state allied with people-driven resistance, rejecting Israeli and Western hegemony. Consequently, Palestine may represent the natural next phase of the liberation project—which began with ending tyranny and will not conclude until occupation ends.

[7] Wall Street Journal, "U.S. toughens demands on Syria's new Islamist-led leadership," May 20, 2025.
[8] Ibid.

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The Position of Global Powers: Containment of Syria or Support for Israel?

In the Aftermath of Assad's Fall

The collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024 was more than a domestic turning point; it marked a seismic shift in the political and strategic map of the Levant. The new leadership in Damascus inherited a nation exhausted by over a decade of war, yet invigorated by the possibilities of independence, sovereignty, and regional realignment. One of the most pressing questions to emerge—both in Arab political circles and in international policy forums—was whether Syria would once again embrace an active role in the Arab-Israeli conflict and reposition itself as a pivotal player in the Resistance Axis.

Renewed Relations with Hamas

Among the earliest indicators of change was the warming of ties between Damascus and the Palestinian movement Hamas. The rupture between the two sides had been bitter, fueled by the Assad regime's brutal crackdown on the Syrian uprising in 2011–2012, during which Hamas distanced itself and relocated its leadership from Damascus to Doha.

Yet as regional dynamics shifted in the early 2020s, and as Assad's grip weakened, contacts were quietly reestablished. By 2022, Hamas publicly voiced its interest in rebuilding ties, framing Syria as "a strategic depth for the resistance" and a necessary partner in the broader struggle against occupation.[1]

[1] The New Arab, "Why is Hamas restoring Ties with the Syrian regime," Chrsitopher Solomon, July 12, 2022; Reuters, "Hamas to restore Syria ties after 10 years of dispute," June 21 2022.

Following the regime's fall, the tone changed dramatically. In December 2024, Hamas issued its first official statement addressed to the new Syrian leadership, congratulating the Syrian people on their liberation and affirming a shared vision rooted in justice, freedom, and resistance.[2] Analysts noted that this rapprochement was not merely symbolic—it hinted at a potential revival of Syria's role as a political, logistical, and even operational hub for Palestinian resistance factions, much as it had been before the war.

Relations with Lebanon's Hezbollah

If Hamas was a returning partner, Hezbollah was a long-standing ally whose relationship with Syria had survived decades of regional turbulence. From the Lebanese Civil War to the 2006 July War against Israel, Damascus and Hezbollah had operated as strategic partners. Under Assad, Syria had served as a vital conduit for weapons and supplies from Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

The fall of Assad initially prompted Hezbollah to offer verbal support for Syria's new leadership, framing it as part of a "continuity in the resistance camp." However, reality soon tested this rhetoric. In March 2025, border skirmishes erupted between Syrian armed units and Hezbollah militias in disputed frontier zones.[3] While both sides downplayed the clashes as "misunderstandings," observers saw them as a sign of the recalibration underway. The new Syrian leadership was asserting sovereignty over its borders and signaling that partnerships—even with long-time allies—would no longer be unconditional.

Forming a New Resistance Axis

The shifting dynamics raised the prospect of a renewed and reconfigured Resistance Axis—one in which Syria would no longer be a passive link but an active node. The leadership in Damascus began quietly hosting meetings with various Palestinian factions, including Islamic Jihad and leftist-nationalist groups, discussing coordinated political positions and security arrangements.

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[2] Reuters, "Hamas congratulates Syrians on fall of Assad," December 9, 2024.
[3] Clashes between Syrian transitional government and Hezbollah (Wikipedia).

For many in the Arab world, this represented a potential return to the days when Syria was a strategic hub for liberation movements. However, unlike the Assad era—where alliances were often instrumental and transactional—the post-2024 approach appeared to be rooted in a more ideological framework, drawing on the revolutionary legitimacy earned through the overthrow of dictatorship.

Such cooperation could produce a more unified front in confronting regional challenges, particularly the Israeli occupation of Palestinian and Syrian lands. If nurtured, this alignment could also help restore a measure of strategic parity in the region, which has tilted heavily toward Israeli dominance in recent years.

International Reactions

These shifts have not gone unnoticed. Washington, Brussels, and other Western capitals are watching closely, with concerns that Syria might transform into an active base of operations for anti-Israeli resistance across multiple fronts—Gaza, the West Bank, southern Lebanon, and even the occupied Golan Heights.

In response, Israel has deepened its security coordination with select Arab governments, seeking to isolate Damascus diplomatically and economically. Behind closed doors, Israeli officials have pushed for international aid to be conditioned on Syria refraining from military involvement in the Palestinian and Lebanese theaters. Meanwhile, some Western diplomats have encouraged the new Syrian leadership to prioritize "reconstruction and economic integration" over "regional adventurism," an appeal clearly aimed at steering Damascus away from confrontation with Israel.

Future Challenges

Despite the momentum toward enhanced resistance cooperation, several obstacles lie ahead. International pressure—both overt and covert—will be constant. Regionally, the leadership in Damascus must navigate a delicate balance: strengthening ties with Palestinian and Lebanese allies without becoming entangled in conflicts that could drain resources and invite foreign intervention.

Moreover, Syria faces the monumental task of national reconstruction. Restoring infrastructure, reviving the economy, and resettling millions of displaced citizens will require stability and resources that could be jeopardized by prolonged regional confrontation.

Still, history and geography weigh heavily on Syria's choices. The shared memory of past struggles, coupled with a renewed sense of sovereignty, suggests that Damascus will not easily forgo its role in the wider Arab liberation project. For many Syrians—especially the post-revolution generation—the path from revolution at home to liberation abroad is not just a political option, but a natural progression of their national mission.

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How the Revolution Transformed the Syrian Generation's Mindset

From a Generation of Fear to a Generation of Initiative

Before the outbreak of the revolution in 2011, an entire generation of Syrians grew up under an authoritarian rule that criminalized free expression and instilled fear of the security apparatus in every home. Young generations were raised on a culture of fear—accepting reality as it was, and never imagining the possibility of confronting or changing authority.

The Syrian revolution overturned this equation entirely. The same children who were taught that "silence is survival" were the ones who wrote on the walls of Daraa, igniting the spark of rebellion. New generations of youth emerged, taking part in peaceful protests, engaging in civil activism, and later in armed struggle—transforming into the nucleus of alternative military and civilian leadership.

As the thinker Burhan Ghalioun observed, the "hidden revolution" produced a generation that believes only in freedom—a generation that developed an early political maturity previously unseen.[1]

From Dependence to Independence

Arab regimes, including Syria's, had long sought to produce loyal elites steeped in a culture of submission to international powers, promoting the idea that confronting Israel—or any major global force—was sheer madness.

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[1] Burhan Ghalioun, *'Uth al-Dhāt: Waqa'i' Thawrah lam Taktamil.*
Silvia Carenzi, "An Evolving 'Popular Incubator': Syria's New Leadership and Its Balancing Act," ISPI, June 4, 2025.

The revolution, however, gave rise to a generation that sees independence from foreign alliances as a foundational principle of struggle, not an exception.[2] Many of today's revolutionary leaders have developed an acute awareness of the importance of avoiding subservience to any foreign state, learning to distinguish between temporary external assistance and a long-term, independent national project.

As one field commander in Idlib put it: *"He who does not control his own decision cannot liberate his land."*

Unprecedented Field Experience

For more than a decade, this generation has faced one of the fiercest military campaigns in modern history. They have experienced:

- Fighting conventional forces backed by Russian air power.
- Confronting multi-national sectarian militias.
- Enduring siege, starvation, and chemical weapons attacks.
- Leading and organizing the affairs of besieged communities.

These experiences have given young leaders a realistic understanding of tactics and strategy, along with an appreciation for grassroots organization and collective action.[3] The weapon, for them, is no longer a reckless instrument, but part of a national liberation project with defined political and moral objectives.

Embracing an Inclusive National Discourse

Unlike the regime that sowed sectarianism and division, the new revolutionary generation has maintained an inclusive national discourse. At the forefront of the revolution stand free-minded Sunnis, Alawites, Christians, and Druze, united against tyranny.

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[2] David Schenker, "After Assad: Future of Syria," Washington Institute, June 5, 2025.

[3] Silvia Carenzi, "An Evolving 'Popular Incubator': Syria's New Leadership and Its Balancing Act," ISPI, June 4, 2025.

Many revolutionaries have rejected attempts to turn the uprising into a sectarian conflict, insisting that the struggle is between a free people and a despotic regime—not between religious communities. This spirit of unity strengthens the prospects of a shared national project and increases popular acceptance in the new Syria.[4]

A Liberation-Oriented Combat Doctrine

Unlike the regime's army, trained in the principle of "blind obedience," the revolutionary generation holds a combat doctrine rooted in faith in freedom, rejection of occupation, and readiness for sacrifice.

This generation wields not only weapons, but a vision: a just, independent state that restores Syria's historic role in leading the nation and liberating Palestine.[5] Their doctrine is less subject to international dictates and far less willing to accept unjust settlements—posing an existential threat to Zionist projects that depend on weakened, compliant Arab regimes.

Between Displacement and Exile… An Unyielding Awareness

Despite the mass displacement of millions of Syrians, the spirit has not been broken. In exile—whether in universities, refugee camps, or faraway cities—ideas, writings, and organizations have emerged, all expressing the consciousness of a generation raised on freedom and resistance to tyranny.

A young man from Idlib in Gaziantep writes a novel about *dignity*. A child from Douma in Berlin paints a picture about *freedom*. A young woman from Daraa in Sweden establishes an association to support detainees.

This is the generation of the revolution—shaped by blood, sustained by hope, and carrying a cause that will not die, for it was born of both suffering and dignity.

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[4] Wikipedia: Syrian Opposition (2011-2024).

[5] Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Syria Breakdown, Episode Four: Revolutionary Rebuilding and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)," The Washington Institute, Feb 6, 2025.

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The New Syria at the Dawn of Liberation

The New Syria and the People's Army – A Doctrine of Liberation and Sovereignty

The Syrian people waged one of the most complex and courageous revolutions in modern history. It was not merely a confrontation with a local tyrant, but an open clash with an intertwined regional and international system united in a single aim: to break the will of a nation that had decided to be free.

From the very first day, the Syrian revolution faced unprecedented brutality: Russian warplanes, sectarian militias backed by Iran, siege and starvation, and a suspicious global silence. Yet the Syrians proved an eternal truth — nations do not collapse when they choose freedom as their destiny.

With the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024, Syrians began turning the page on a chapter stained with blood and opened a new one written in the ink of dignity, awareness, and national responsibility. But this historic victory is not the end of the road — it is the beginning of a new phase, more complex and more decisive.

At the heart of this phase lies a central question: How can a newly liberated country build a national army that protects the people and safeguards the land, prevents the return of tyranny — without sliding into the militarization of the state or reproducing the same security-state model?

From the Tyrant's Army to the People's Army

One of the first decisions of the transitional government in 2025 was to dismantle the military and security apparatuses that had formed the backbone of tyranny. Syria could not be reborn in the hands of the same

institutions that had killed, imprisoned, and terrorized its people for decades.

Major intelligence agencies — such as the Air Force Intelligence Directorate and Military Security — were dissolved, along with the elite 4th Armored Division and the Republican Guard, both symbols of oppression and war crimes. In a groundbreaking step, the Supreme Commission for Transitional Justice, in cooperation with the interim Ministry of Defense, undertook a vetting process to select clean and competent officers and integrate them into the nucleus of a new army.

By the end of January 2025, the formation of the new Syrian Armed Forces had begun — an army loyal not to a person or party, but to the constitution and a democratic civil state. Its founding principles included:

- Loyalty to the state, not the individual, with the army subject to oversight by an elected civilian authority.
- Integration of revolutionary armed factions into unified regular units under a central command.
- Reform of military education with modern curricula that promote respect for law and the ethics of combat.
- Abolition of arbitrary compulsory service, replacing it with a fair national service governed by clear laws.
- Creation of an elected National Security Council to oversee the military institution and ensure its transparency.

The goal was not to remilitarize the state, but to restore the people's right to protection — without repression or humiliation.[1]

A New Military Doctrine: Dignity and Defense

In March 2025, the Transitional National Council ratified the National Military Doctrine Charter, which laid the cornerstone of the new defensive vision. Its main points included:

[1] Mohammed Hassan, "Building Syria's new army: Future plans and the challenges ahead," Middle East Institute, June 12, 2025.

- Protecting national sovereignty and the unity of Syrian territory.
- Commitment to international humanitarian law and human rights in all military operations.
- Avoiding involvement in foreign alliances or wars that do not serve the national interest.
- Retaining the right to respond and defend against aggression without being drawn into reckless military adventures.
- Building balanced defense partnerships with friendly states in training and technology.

It is a doctrine that reflects a Syria seeking just peace, but refusing domination, occupation, or fragmentation.[2]

Securing a Fragile Victory Amid the Rubble

Despite the regime's fall, Syria still suffers from deep security fragility. The main challenges include:

- Sleeper cells loyal to the former regime attempting to destabilize the country through assassinations and bombings.
- Sectarian militias backed by Iran operating in some border areas.
- Remnants of ISIS and extremist groups seeking to exploit the security vacuum.
- Weak security infrastructure in some liberated cities due to destruction and displacement.

To address these threats, rapid-response counterinsurgency units were formed in coordination with a newly trained civilian police force. A nationwide campaign was launched to disarm militias, register light weapons, and empower local councils to preserve community safety —

[2] Laith Al-Jnaidi and Mohammad Sio, "Syria defense chief vows to buil army with 'national doctrine' under unified command," Anadulu Agency, June 5, 2025.

following a decentralized model of partnership between the army and society.[3]

National Security in a New Form

In the wake of the revolution, Syria redefined "national security." It is no longer merely guarded borders or traditional weaponry, but a comprehensive concept that includes:

- **Economic security:** Protecting national resources and ensuring food and energy security.
- **Cybersecurity:** Safeguarding the digital infrastructure from external breaches.
- **Environmental security:** Addressing the war's ecological impact and building clean, safe cities.
- **Social security:** Combating sectarianism and hate speech, and fostering a unifying national culture.

To coordinate this comprehensive vision, the Supreme National Security Council was established — comprising experts in military, economic, technological, and social fields — to develop integrated strategies that protect Syria from collapse, not just from invasion.[4]

The Generation That Reclaimed the Homeland

The revolution toppled a tyrant, but it also gave birth to a new generation — young Syrians who grew up under barrel bombs and exile, yet were raised on awareness, dignity, and resistance.

These are the ones who fought on the frontlines, managed local councils, taught children in camps, negotiated with the world in the name of the revolution, and paid heavy prices for a future worthy of Syria's sons and daughters.

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[3] Abby Sewell, "Syria's government and Kurds still at odds over merging forces after latest talks, US envoy says," AP, July, 9, 2025.
[4] Wikipedia: National Security Council (Syria).

Today, they are the ones building the new Syria — a civil, just, sovereign state, beholden neither to ruler nor foreign power, drawing its legitimacy from the blood of martyrs and the steadfastness of the living.

Their compass does not stop at Damascus alone — it also points toward Jerusalem, not as an escape from domestic concerns, but as a commitment to the broader Arab and human meaning of dignity.

In an era when peoples have collapsed, regimes have reconciled with occupation, and surrender has become commonplace, revolutionary Syria stands as a beacon of hope — a people who broke their chains, chose freedom, and are rebuilding on the foundations of justice, not revenge.

The army of the new Syria will not be a whip over the people's backs, but a shield for their freedom. "We want to live" is no longer a passing cry, but a complete life project.

If this project is well-designed and guarded with awareness and will, it could mark the beginning of a just order — not only for Syria, but for an Arab world seeking its path to revival.

Epilogue

From Spilled Blood to the Longed-for Homeland

This book is more than a chronicle of revolution. It is a testimony carved from anguish and hope, a mirror held up to a decade of sacrifice, a voice for the silenced, and a map toward a future still in the making. It is not merely an account of massacres, displacement, or broken cities—it is a humble contribution to the resurrection of a homeland born from the ashes of tyranny.

Yes, the tyrant has fallen. But tyranny itself is more than a man—it is a system, a culture, a deep-rooted disease that cannot be healed with headlines or declarations. True liberation begins only when the ghosts of fear are exorcised from hearts, when sectarianism and corruption are no longer stitched into the nation's fabric, and when dignity becomes the cornerstone of citizenship.

The Syrian revolution—though bruised, betrayed, and bloodied—was not in vain. It stirred a people once silenced by decades of repression. It gave birth to a new political consciousness, a renewed sense of national identity, and a collective belief that freedom is not only possible, but worth dying for. Even if every demand was not fulfilled, one undeniable truth remains: Syrians are no longer the same. The wall of silence has collapsed, and a generation has risen that will not bow again.

Now begins the most arduous phase: the revolution of construction—a revolution without rifles, but no less dangerous. To build a Syria with no secret dungeons, no mukhabarat state, no foreign overlords. A Syria governed by the rule of law and protected by an army loyal to the people, not to power.

Let us not be deceived: Post-Assad Syria is not the product of a treaty, nor a trophy handed by foreign capitals. It is not the spoils of diplomacy. It is the responsibility of those who endured the bombs, dug graves, sheltered the displaced, taught children in ruins, and documented

truth at the risk of death. It is also the duty of those who may not have fought on the battlefield, but who now must fight to preserve what was won—through education, through institutions, through accountability.

We write these words:

For the children whose names we no longer remember,
For the fathers who kissed their families goodbye and never returned,
For the women who stood between bullets and their towns,
For the prisoners who marked time in the dark,
And for the unborn generations who will inherit not just land, but legacy.

Let this book be their witness.

Let them know that freedom is never granted by decree—it is seized, nurtured, and defended. That a homeland is not drawn with ink but with tears, blood, and sacrifice. That dignity is not a slogan—it is the breath of those who chose death over humiliation.

And so we turn our hearts to the One who sees all:

O Allah,
The Just who never wrongs,
The Strong who is never overcome,
The All-Seeing who never forgets—

Have mercy on our martyrs.
Heal our wounded.
Free our prisoners from the shadows of injustice.

O Allah, You are the Witness to our suffering. We wrote this book not in pursuit of praise or reward, but as a record of truth, a stand with the oppressed, and a tribute to those who gave everything so that Syria might live.

Do not let our sacrifices be scattered like dust.
Do not let our pain be buried beneath headlines.
Do not let our people suffer again what they have already survived.

Grant us, O Lord, the dawn we were promised—
A dawn of justice that shines through the smoke,

A dawn where mothers sleep without fear,
Where children learn of freedom not through war, but through love.

O Lord, we have no army but our prayers,
No shield but our faith,
No hope but in You.

Give us the patience of the steadfast,
The triumph of the truthful,
And the honor of the free.

And if we fall short—
Let our children carry the torch.
Let them raise their heads on the ruins of tyranny,
And build upon them a homeland more radiant than our dreams.

Āmīn, O Lord of the worlds.

Appendix

The Kuftaro Group: Positions on the Syrian Revolution

Source: https://www.syria.tv/114745

With the Outbreak of the Syrian Revolution in March 2011

The religious establishment as a whole was thrown into deep confusion and faced an acute crisis in taking a clear stance. Most of its schools delayed formulating their positions—whether in support of the revolution or siding with the regime. This hesitation stemmed from numerous factors related to the institutional structure and intellectual composition of the religious establishment, which is beyond the scope of discussion here.

Entering the Revolutionary Era with Three Heads

The Kuftaro group entered the revolution as a fragmented entity—both in image and in practice. Internal disputes among disciples and the influence of security agencies had torn the group apart, leaving it divided, without unified leadership or direction.

One could say that the Kuftaro group faced the revolution with **three competing heads**:

- **Shaykh Rajab Deeb**, who represented a deeply Sufi-Naqshbandi spiritual path.
- **Sharif Sawwaf**, who oversaw the *Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro Center* and represented its institutional face.
- **Ustadh Ghassan al-Jabban**, who led the most organized and structured faction within the group.

Each of these figures had their own disciples and followers who obeyed them, forming sub-groups within the larger Kuftaro community.

This multiplicity of leadership could have created a strategic opportunity for a diversified response to the Syrian revolution. However, due to the rivalry and enmity among these figures, the group once again missed the chance to play an effective role in the historic uprising that would reshape Syria.

The Group's Leadership and Symbols Respond to the Revolution

The positions of the group's leading shaykhs—especially those visible in the media—were clearly in rejection of the revolution and its approach to change. They openly supported the regime.

Shaykh **Rajab Deeb**, in some of his public lessons early in the revolution, declared:

"Those who take to the streets in protests—Allah is not pleased with them or their actions. Their demonstrations will bring us embarrassment. After the security services twist their ears, we'll have to run around trying to get them out. I'm telling you: we will not run to release anyone."

As for **Ghassan al-Jabban**, he was careful from the beginning not to make any public statement—neither for the regime nor the revolution. However, reports from his private meetings with circle leaders (known in the group as *ra's al-raht*, those with smaller groups of disciples) revealed that he explicitly told them, in meetings where recording was prohibited:

"We are with the regime. Don't embarrass us. Warn the small study circles not to participate in any protests. Their participation will reflect on the entire group, and we will not accept that. Our Shaykh Ahmad Kuftaro does not accept that—even from his grave. Protesting will ruin the group's work and harm the mission."

Sharif Sawwaf, on the other hand, adopted an overt and unabashed pro-regime stance from the revolution's outset. He frequently appeared on regime media outlets as the primary voice from the Kuftaro group defending the regime and attacking the revolution.

Among the most prominent figures regularly featured in regime media was **Dr. Abd al-Salam Rajeh**, a key personality from the Kuftaro Center, son of Sheikh Ahmad Rajeh—one of the group's major figures—and a member of the Syrian Parliament. He was one of the most vocal regime supporters, alongside Sawwaf.

The Kuftaro group's shaykhs sought to justify their pro-regime stance using the same narrative adopted by most religious institutions aligned with the regime: protecting the "achievements of daʿwah," preserving what had been built over decades, and avoiding the destruction brought on by what they saw as an impulsive youth-led uprising. They claimed that wisdom was required in dealing with the regime to achieve gradual change.

Dr. Abd al-Salam Rajeh, in particular, would sometimes intervene to release detained disciples who had joined the protests, as a way of legitimizing his stance—claiming that his support for the regime was to protect the group and its members. The regime encouraged this perception by accepting such interventions, reinforcing the shaykhs' image among their students and followers.

Disciples and Young Shaykhs: Diverse Reactions to the Revolution

The revolution ignited serious and heated discussions within most religious groups, including the Kuftaro group. As protests grew and bloodshed continued, these debates intensified.

Naturally, the nature of these discussions varied between disciples in hot zones and those in calmer areas.

Young followers of the Kuftaro group generally fell into three categories:

1. **Supporters of the regime**, obedient to their shaykhs and rejecting the revolution and its call for change.
2. **The confused**, unable to adopt a clear stance—neither supporting the regime nor the revolution. Some believed both sides were wrong, while others were simply paralyzed and undecided.

3. **Participants in the revolution**, both civil and armed. Most of these were from protest-heavy regions and sided with their communities against the injustice they witnessed. They defied obedience, and hundreds were arrested, while hundreds more were martyred—especially in rural areas. Many young disciples from the Kuftaro group were killed in Daraya, Douma, Qudsaya, Muadamiyyah, and rural Daraa, among other places.

One notable example is **Shaykh Usama ʿAbd al-Haqq**, a young shaykh from the group who was martyred under torture along with his father, while all his brothers were imprisoned. He is one among many disciples of the Kuftaro group who stepped outside the traditional mold and joined the Syrian revolution.

Of course, these young men do not represent the Kuftaro group as an institution, but they are a vital segment that cannot be ignored when discussing the group's stance on the revolution.

The Appointment of Shaykh Adnan al-Afyouni as Mufti of Damascus

Born in 1954, Adnan al-Afyouni was not among the top-tier shaykhs of the Kuftaro group or the Naqshbandi order. He was a close disciple of Shaykh Rajab Deeb.

Al-Afyouni adopted a strongly pro-regime position early in the revolution. In 2013, Bashar al-Assad appointed him as the **third mufti of Damascus**, following Shaykhs Bashir Eid al-Bari and Abd al-Fattah al-Bezm. He began delivering Friday sermons at al-Taqwa Mosque in Dummar, replacing Shaykh ʿAdil Mustaw, who took over al-Sahaba Mosque. Al-Afyouni, however, retained his weekly lessons at al-Sahaba.

His appointment had little to do with scholarly merit, religious qualifications, or affiliation with the Kuftaro group. Instead, it was driven by the regime's urgent need for a figure with local popularity in the **Damascus countryside**, especially Qudsaya and surrounding areas, where he had a religious presence. This made him an ideal figure to serve as the face of the so-called "reconciliation" deals (*musalaha*) in volatile areas.

Al-Afyouni was also appointed director of the **Sham International Center for Countering Terrorism and Extremism**, a regime-linked body central to producing religious discourse that framed the revolution—both civil and armed—as "extremism."

He was assassinated with an explosive device outside al-Sahaba Mosque in Qudsaya after evening prayers on **Thursday, October 22, 2020**, when a bomb in his car exploded, killing him instantly.

His appointment cannot be interpreted as an attempt to reward or co-opt the Kuftaro group. By 2013, two years into the revolution, the regime no longer saw the group as centrally relevant.

Rather, the sole motive behind appointing al-Afyouni was the regime's need for a figure who could **mediate local deals** with rebel groups. Claims that his appointment was connected to the Kuftaro group are inaccurate; the decision was based on al-Afyouni's personal popularity in Qudsaya and his perceived usefulness, not his organizational affiliation.

The Regime's View of the Kuftaro Group's Role in the Revolution

The regime has always aimed to mobilize religious voices from all schools to bolster its legitimacy. It actively seeks to win over all clerical voices to its side.

However, its reliance on the Kuftaro group has diminished drastically since the era of Shaykh Ahmad Kuftaro. In the 1980s and 1990s, the regime heavily depended on the group to promote its policies and image.

But the group lost its central role in Syria's religious landscape due to **internal fragmentation**—the result of infighting and manipulation by figures like the Minister of Awqaf, **Muhammad ʿAbd al-Sattar al-Sayyid**, and **security agencies**.

By the time the revolution erupted, the regime saw the Kuftaro group as **fractured and ineffective**. It quickly shifted its attention elsewhere.

The regime easily found a replacement in the **Fath Islamic Group**, which stepped in to fill the void and became the dominant religious institution supporting regime narratives—effectively inheriting the Kuftaro group's former statu

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