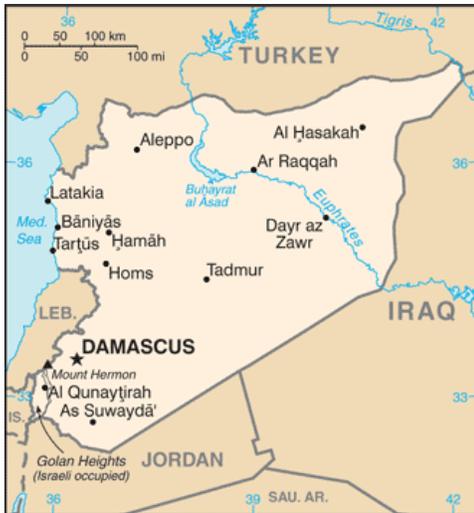


Syria



Form of Government: Republic under military regime; President Bashar al-Assad

Population: 22.5 million

Ethnic Groups: 90% Arabic, 10% Kurd/Armenian/other

Religion: 74% Sunni Muslim, 16% Muslim, other (includes Alawite and Druze), 10% Christian

Age: one third of the population is under 15

Women's Participation: In 2011, women formed only 3.2% of the local council members; in 2011, women's parliamentary participation was 12%.

Context & Background to the Conflict

Bashar al-Assad (Baath Party) took over rule of Syria after his father's death in 2000. He has maintained strong support from his own Alawite community, which makes up 12% of the country's population. He has also been backed by much of the Christian minority, who prefer his secular rule to an Islamist

alternative. In March of 2011, peaceful protesting began in Damascus and the southern city of Deraa. Government security forces shot and killed several protesters, which led to days of violent unrest across the country. Several months later, the government troops besieged the town of Jisr al-Shughour and more than 10,000 people fled for Turkey. In July 2011, Assad removed the governor of the northern province of Hama and sent in troops to restore order. Shortly thereafter, opposition groups met in Istanbul to form the Syrian National Council (SNC), which promotes the resignation of Assad and the establishment of a modern, civil, and democratic state. That same month also marks the creation of the Free Syrian Army, an armed opposition group composed of defected Syrian Armed Forces personnel and volunteers. The SNC was the most significant Syrian opposition group in exile until November 11, 2012, when it joined the broader National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (Syrian National Coalition). The Syrian National Coalition was created in response to international pressure for the formation of an opposition council that was more diverse and inclusive than the SNC. The Coalition has gained greater international support (including financial) and was formally recognized in 2012 by the US, Britain, France, Turkey and Gulf states as "the legitimate representative" of the Syrian people.

The fighting continues today and is based in large part on the ethnic divides which are exploited, exaggerated and misunderstood. As a result, Syria has become a battleground for regional, and international, forces to carry out their own political battles. Hezbollah and other Shia dominated groups, such as Iran, have joined the fight in support of the government. Whereas the opposition, which is dominated by Sunni Muslims, has been propped up by Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the US. Over 150,000 people have been killed in Syria since 2011, including at least 8000 children and 5300 women. There are 9 million people in need of immediate assistance, and over one million people are under full siege. To escape the violence, over 2.4 million refugees have registered with the office of the UN High Commissioner on Refugees (an additional one to two million are unregistered) and have fled to Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Turkey.

Inclusion of Women

Organizations that have focused on bringing Syrian women into the process have communicated, collaborated, and sought to coordinate their efforts since the beginning. International organizations and a diverse network of Syrian groups engaged with each other to undertake a range of capacity building efforts, support local peacemaking, initiate Track II processes, and help develop civil society platforms. Advocacy mechanism to bring in women's voices were already in place in 2012, and first began to coalesce with the emergence of the Syrian Women's Network (SWN), a national network committed to advocating for women's equal participation in all aspects of peace, security and future governance. Other Syrian women's organizations include – but are not limited to – Syrian Women's League, Center for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria, Syrian Women's Forum for Peace, Mobaderoon, and Madania.

Great efforts are being made to ensure women's participation in the negotiations. The original Geneva communiqué of 2012 explicitly states "that women must be fully represented in all aspects of the transition." In January of this year, UN

Women convened a meeting of Syrian women civil society members and activists in support of women's participation and voice in the Syrian peace process. Focus on engaging directly with the Track 1 process gathered momentum through 2013 as a result of coordinated advocacy, but has not yet been successful.

Key Warring Parties

Syrian Government (President Bashar al-Assad)

Opposition: Syrian National Council; Syrian National Coalition for Opposition and Revolutionary Forces; Free Syrian Army

Islamic Opposition Groups: Jabhat al-Nusra Front (leader declared loyalty to al-Qaeda in 2013, but has resisted a merger with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria); Syrian Islamic Front; Syrian Islamic Liberation Front; Islamic Front

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS): ISIS is an unrecognized self-proclaimed independent state and active jihadist militant group in Iraq and Syria. Al-Qaeda cut ties with ISIS in February 2014.

Hezbollah: Hezbollah members, part of the Shiite militant sect, are fighting in Syria against Islamic extremists who pose a danger to Lebanon, and have pledged that their group will not allow Syrian militants to control areas that border Lebanon. Syria, along with Iran, has been the main backer of Hezbollah and much of the group's arsenal consisting tens of thousands of rockets is believed to have come through or from Syria.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

2011 – Syrian women take up proactive roles as influential activists, journalists and human rights lawyers

July 2011 – The Free Syrian Army formed to “protect civilian protesters from the aggression of the regime forces”

Feb 2012 – A U.N. Security Council resolution condemning Syria's action is vetoed by Russia and China

Feb 2012 – Friends of Syria, a group of more than 100 States, is formed under the initiative of former French President Nicolas Sarkozy

March 2012 – Kofi Annan is assigned as the UN Special Envoy to Syria

June 2012 – U.N. suspends monitoring mission set up to observe a cease-fire and implement Annan's peace plan

June 2012 – Geneva Communiqué 1: The international community (led by the US and Russia) agree to non-binding 6-point plan to stop violence and move the two sides towards a political settlement; members from neither the Syrian regime nor the opposition were present during these discussions

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-Syrian Women's Network formally established in Cairo

-Dutch MoFA, Hivos and ICAN collaborate to support closed and public meetings at UNGA with Syrian partners

-Assad's regime accused of using chemical weapons in an attack on Syrian civilians that killed hundreds

-New York UN General Assembly (UNGA): women's organization representatives demand consistent ongoing interaction between women's network and UN Envoy Brahimi; UNW leads this effort

-UNW convenes 50 Syrian women in Amman to lay the groundwork for coalition

-Panel convened between Envoy Brahimi and Syrian women; Brahimi leaves session prior to women's presentations

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-UNW convenes 47 women in Geneva where they (1) develop common platform as Syrian Women's Initiative (SWI); and (2) agree to representation of 10 women as members of 'forward planning committee' for Geneva 2 Talks

-**Geneva Communiqué 2** (22-31 January): The second UN-backed international peace talks open with Syrian regime and opposition delegation (with only a few women on each negotiating team); no women from SWI invited to formal sessions, but they meet with foreign ministers to build demand for representation in the process; the talks fail, largely because Syrian authorities refuse to discuss a transitional government

-Illegitimate elections held in government-controlled areas; Assad wins 88.7% of votes