

## **Syria: Battleground of 'Power, Politics and Economics'**

*Husnain Shehzad and Zubair Ahmed*

### **Abstract**

*This study explores the Syrian conflict's transformation into a prolonged proxy war, highlighting the interplay between internal vulnerabilities and external interventions, with three dimensions: power, politics, and economics and addressing a critical research gap in understanding the nexus of authoritarian governance, sectarian divides, and international intervention. The study uses a qualitative approach, which analyses academic research, policy reports, credible news sources, and conflict data. The findings indicate that the Assad regime's sectarian patronage system and elite-focused economic model fuelled dissent, while foreign powers exacerbated the conflict through competing agendas. Syria's war has claimed over 400,000 lives, displaced millions, shrunk GDP by 60 percent, and caused infrastructure losses estimated at USD 1.2 trillion. The study underscores the necessity for inclusive political processes, equitable economic reforms, and decentralised government to achieve sustainable peace and progress. It contributes to the discourse on proxy warfare and global rivalry, offering insights into the complexities of internal collapse compounded by international competition.*

**Keywords:** Syria, Civil War, Proxy Agents, Intervention, Global Powers.

## Introduction

Since 1970, the Assad dynasty has governed Syria. Hafez al-Assad came into power through a military takeover. Hafez managed Syria's sectarian environment. As a member of the Alawite minority, he empowered the Alawite community at the centre of the regime's political and military elite. His ruthless crackdown against the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama in 1982 resulted in hundreds of deaths, established his regime's intolerance of opposition and created authoritarian rule. In 2000, with Hafez's death, his son Bashar al-Assad took over the presidency, sparking optimism about political reforms and economic modernisation. However, his father's authoritarian structures and loyalist network weakened hopes for a more open Syria, leading to entrenched political repression and economic stagnation and the struggle to reform Syria's authoritarian framework. Time passed, and 2011 came, which proved to be the year of the Arab Spring. Sparked by Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in Tunisia, it fuelled widespread uprisings that led to the toppling of leaders and destabilised six Arab League nations. Despite the demise of multiple countries, no true democracies emerged. Tunisia and Egypt faced instability, Libya saw NATO intervention, Bahrain crushed dissent, and Yemen's transition caused uncertainty.<sup>1</sup>

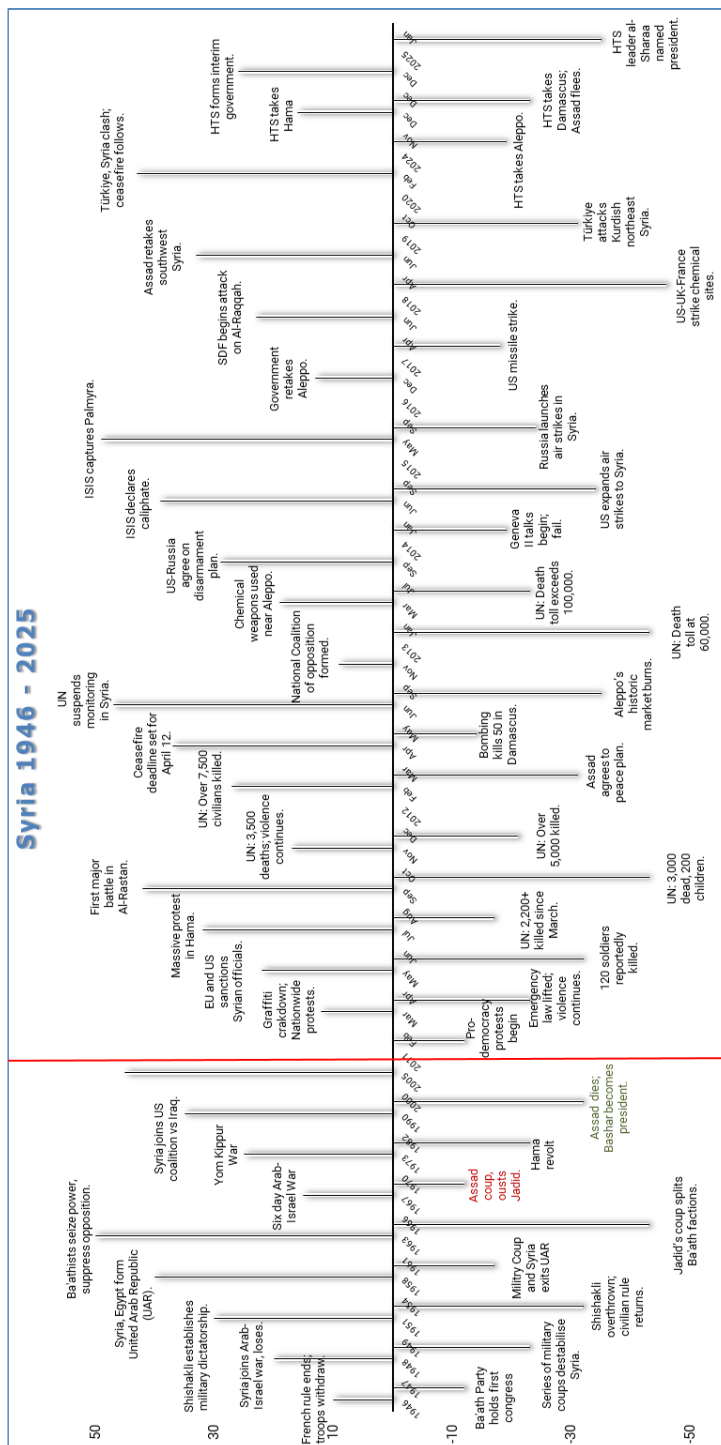
Protests erupted in Syria in January 2011 due to the Arab Spring movement. The uprising transformed into a nationwide rebellion in March 2011. The rebellion became highly complex, fuelled by proxy warfare between foreign powers. Syria turned into one of the deadliest conflicts in the Middle East. Various nations intervened to achieve their regional strategic targets and interests<sup>2</sup> (See Figure I):

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<sup>1</sup> Charlene Karina Lupita, "The Impact of Arab Spring on Middle East," *BINUS University*, Accessed April 12, 2025, [ir.binus.ac.id/2018/12/06/the-impact-of-arab-spring-on-middle-east/](https://ir.binus.ac.id/2018/12/06/the-impact-of-arab-spring-on-middle-east/); Al Jazeera, "Remembering Mohamed Bouazizi: The Man who Sparked the Arab Spring," December 17, 2020, [aljazeera.com/features/2020/12/17/remembering-mohamed-bouazizi-his-death-triggered-the-arab](https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/12/17/remembering-mohamed-bouazizi-his-death-triggered-the-arab); Abdallah Imam Haruna, "The Political Economy of the Violence in Syria: An Impact-Based Analysis," *European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (2021): 41-51, [doi.org/10.24018/ejsocial.2021.1.1.8](https://doi.org/10.24018/ejsocial.2021.1.1.8); Times Now World, "Assad Dynasty Rule Ends in Syria: How A Family Ruled Sunni Nation For 50 Years," December 8, 2024, [timesnownews.com/world/middle-east/assad-dynasty-rule-ends-in-syria-how-a-family-ruled-sunni-nation-for-50-years-article-116111820](https://timesnownews.com/world/middle-east/assad-dynasty-rule-ends-in-syria-how-a-family-ruled-sunni-nation-for-50-years-article-116111820).

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Martini, Erin York and William Young, *Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, March 2013), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR213.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR213.html); Marian Zuber and Samuel Sahel Moussa, "Arab Spring as a Background of Civil War in Syria," *International Conference Knowledge-Based Organization*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2018), pp. 245-251, [doi.org/10.1515/kbo-2018-0038](https://doi.org/10.1515/kbo-2018-0038).

### Figure 1: Timeline of Syria 1946 – 2025



**Source:** Authors' illustration based on existing literature.

**Note:** The red line indicates the beginning of the Arab Spring waves in Syria.

Great powers mainly focus on dealing with other major powers, so they only step in to prevent civil wars when their strategic interests are at stake. Situations such as these are more likely to increase competition in a politically unstable area, although that area naturally needs regional cooperation for stability. During these circumstances, great powers favour opposing political factions while playing diplomatic games to conceal their hand. The vital strategic position of Syria between the Mediterranean Basin, Fertile Crescent, and Arabian Peninsula has established it as a dominant political force in the region and as a key trade hub while being an ideal strategic position for the military.

External powers have had different strategic goals in the Syrian conflict. The United States of America (USA) and Russia emphasised military presence as both nations supported opposing forces in the region to establish dominance, but China chose political and economic dominance. Intense sectarian tensions between Shiites and Sunnis grew even more severe because of this proxy conflict. The rise of substantial contestation against President Assad's government triggered instability, which in turn established a golden age for jihadist groups.<sup>3</sup>

This research investigates how external interventions alter fragile political-economic systems. It assesses the 360-degree economic and humanitarian catastrophe created by civil war. The study uses a triangular analytical framework to understand the Syrian conflict by linking the fragility of the regime, external intervention, and economic collapse as these are interconnected forces that exacerbate instability. It is argued that these dynamics create feedback loops that perpetuate conflict but could also lead to resolution, allowing a more comprehensive understanding of the Syrian battlefield as a case study of 'power, politics and economics.' The research also explores future hope for Syria's reconstruction and political stability. The study is significant because it provides insights into the evolving nature of proxy warfare and global rivalry in conflict zones. The study contributes to the existing literature by critically analysing Syria's war economy and transformation into a proxy battlefield.

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<sup>3</sup> Barry R. Posen, "Civil Wars & the Structure of World Power," *Dædalus* 146, no. 4 (2017): 167-179. doi:10.1162/DAED\_a\_00467; Hussein Maklad, "Great Powers Competition in Syria," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 15, no. 3-4 (2022): 54-77. doi.org/10.1525/caa.2022.15.3-4.54.

## Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative methodology rooted in triangulation and thematic content analysis of geopolitical dynamics and governance failures and providing a comprehensive understanding of conflict influences.<sup>4</sup> Triangulation, based on academic literature, policy papers, credible news sources and conflict databases, helped construct a robust evidence base. Thematic content analyses identify patterns in internal governance failures, economic conditions and foreign interventions.<sup>5</sup> This approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of structural domestic factors and international geopolitical dynamics influencing the conflict.

## Background: Torn by War

The Syrian unrest started in March 2011, when a group of teenagers in Deraa were arrested and tortured for spraying revolutionary graffiti. This event catalysed into widespread protests nationwide and reflected deep-seated grievances about corruption, economic inequality and authoritarian regimes. The government's violent crackdown and the lethal use of force, including firing on protesters, led to nationwide rebellion. On 2 December 2011, it was reported that Syria had entered into a civil war state, with over 4,000 dead and an increasing number of soldiers defecting to fight Assad's regime.<sup>6</sup>

The Deraa incident exposed the fragility of Assad's regime and the potential for national uprisings in highly controlled states. Escalation from protests to civil war demonstrates the regime's unwillingness to negotiate and the international community's inability to intervene effectively. 11,117 deaths were reported in the first 13 months of the war, with civilians suffering the most. Col. Riad al-Asaad led the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which included 15,000 low-level Sunni conscripts. The Battle of Aleppo in 2012 saw rebel forces gain control in some areas, including eastern parts of the city, and launched offensives in Damascus. Disparate rebel

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<sup>4</sup> Nilsen Aparecida Vieira Marcondes and Elisa Maria Andrade Brisola, "Análise por triangulação de métodos: um referencial para pesquisas qualitativas-Analysis by Methodological Triangulation: A Framework for Qualitative Research," *Revista Univap* 20, no. 35 (2014): 201-208. doi.org/10.18066/revunivap.v20i35.228; Mona Mohamed, Mohamed AF Ragab, and Amr Arisha, "Qualitative Analysis Methods Review," 3S Group, College of Business, Technological University Dublin (2016), doi.org/10.21427/D75Z25.

<sup>5</sup> Aya Waleed Ahmed Arman, "External Interventions in Internal Conflicts: A Case Study of Yemen," *Humanities & Natural Sciences Journal* 4, no. 6 (2023): 26-33. doi.org/10.53796/hnsj463.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth A. Kennedy and Frank Jordans, "UN: Syria Now in a Civil War," *NBC News*, December 2, 2011, nbcnews.com/id/wbna45514855.

brigades seized key cities, including Aleppo, throughout 2012. In early 2013, Assad's forces attacked rebel-held territory and tightened their grip on regime strongholds in the south. In August, rebels blamed the regime for a chemical attack outside Damascus that killed hundreds of people.<sup>7</sup> The FSA's composition revealed sectarian fissures within Syria's military institutions, with early violence disproportionately affecting civilians. Urban battlegrounds symbolise the war's destructiveness and the regime's determination to hold power.

Figure I provides a comprehensive view of the uprising and shows that with the beginning of the uprising, conflict rose across the country in the next two years. Mass displacement exacerbated demographic issues, putting pressure on neighbouring states and Europe and highlighted the global consequences of civil war.<sup>8</sup>

The UN Human Rights Office reported 306,887 civilian deaths in Syria from 2011 to 2021,<sup>9</sup> which also explains the intensity of war shown in Figure IV, with over half not documented by any group. The war resulted in over 400,000 deaths and the displacement of over 13 million people, with five million fleeing the border, causing a severe refugee crisis. Around half of Syria's pre-war population shown in Figure III required immediate aid. The war's devastation reshaped Syria's demographic, economic, and political landscape, leaving the nation in turmoil with lasting regional and global implications.

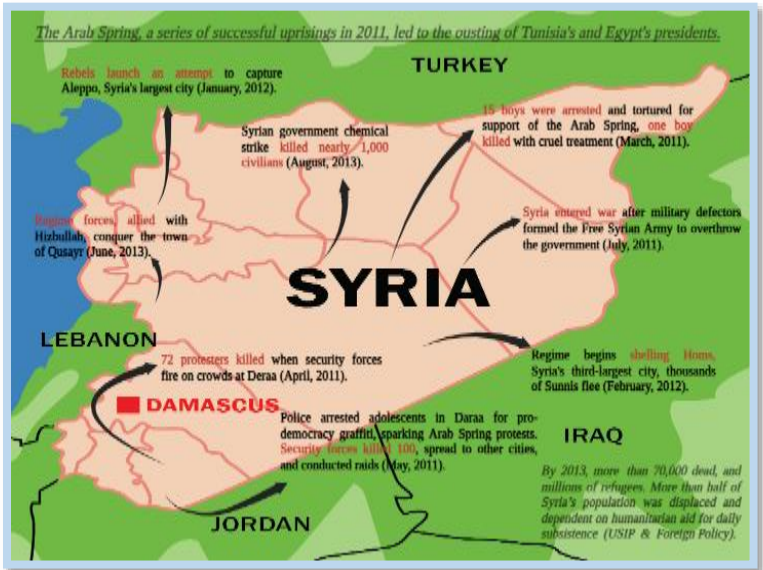
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<sup>7</sup> Al Jazeera, "Syrian Strikes on Aleppo 'Kill Dozens'," September 9, 2012, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2012/9/9/syrian-strikes-on-aleppo-kill-dozens>; Wilson Center, "Syria," Accessed March 10, 2025, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/syria>.

<sup>8</sup> CSIS, "Syria's Economic Collapse and Its Impact on the Most Vulnerable, 2021," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, Accessed March 10, 2025, [csis.org/analysis/syrias-economic-collapse-and-its-impact-most-vulnerable](https://csis.org/analysis/syrias-economic-collapse-and-its-impact-most-vulnerable); Aleksandar Kešeljević and Rok Spruk, "Estimating the Effects of Syrian Civil War," *Empirical Economics* 66, no. 2 (2024): 671-703, [link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00181-023-02470-2](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00181-023-02470-2); Global Financial Magazine, "Economy Wrecked by A Decade of War," Accessed March 10, 2025, [gfmag.com/country/syria-gdp-country-report/](https://gfmag.com/country/syria-gdp-country-report/).

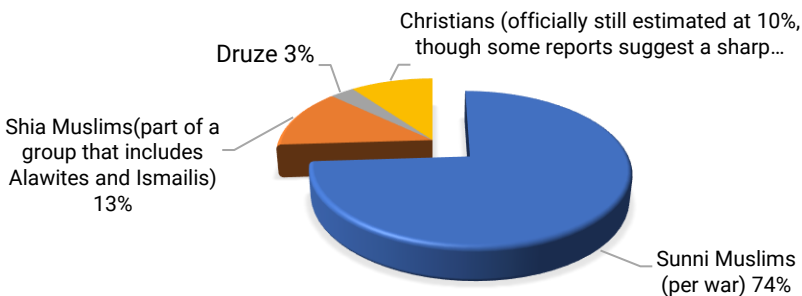
<sup>9</sup> UN-OHCHR, "Behind the Data: Recording Civilian Casualties in Syria," United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, May 11, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2023/05/behind-data-recording-civilian-casualties-syria>.

**Figure II: The Arab Spring: Precursor to the Civil War in Syria**



**Source:** Authors' illustration from multiple sources.<sup>10</sup>

**Figure III: Syria's Religious Demography**

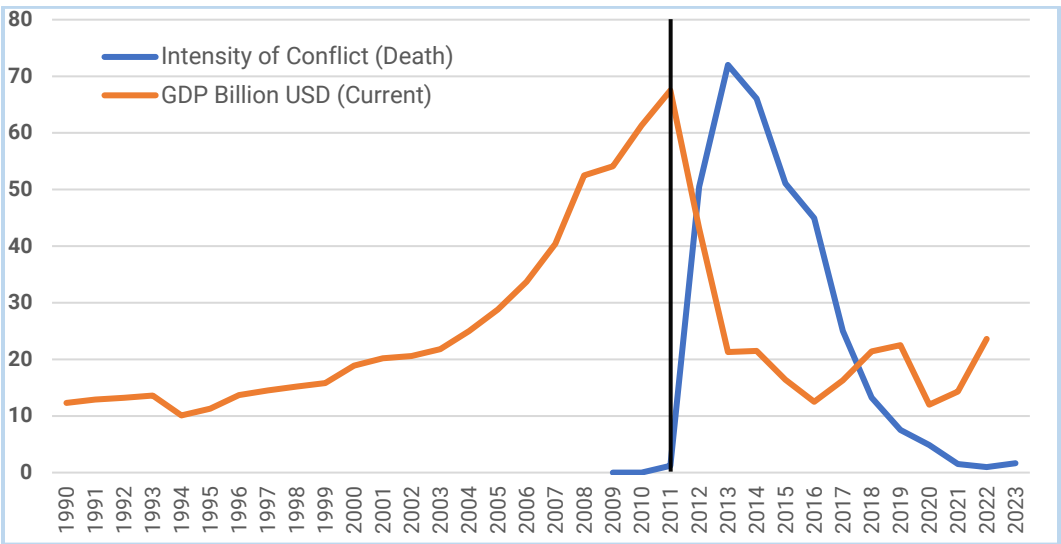


**Source:** Authors' own based on U.S. Department of State data.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> USIP, "Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad," *United States Institute of Peace*, 2021, [usip.org/syria-timeline-uprising-against-assad](https://www.usip.org/syria-timeline-uprising-against-assad); Al Jazeera, "Syria's War Explained from the Beginning," April 14, 2018, [aljazeera.com/news/2018/4/14/syrias-war-explained-from-the-beginning](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/4/14/syrias-war-explained-from-the-beginning); Zuber and Moussa, "Arab Spring as a Background of Civil War in Syria."

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of State, "2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria," In *2023 Report on International Religious Freedom* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department

Figure IV: Battle-related Deaths



**Source:** Authors’ own based on World Bank data.<sup>12</sup>

### The War Economy

From an economic perspective, war economies can be categorised into classic war economies, which focus on war preparation and conduct, and informal war economies, which co-exist with armed violence. War economies dismantle formal structures, fuelling black markets, the informal economy, and violent resource control.<sup>13</sup>

Class relations in Syria have led to the state’s decline, with the macroeconomic framework between 2000 and 2010 leading to misallocation of resources, wealth accumulation for the capitalist elite, and a decline in living standards for most Syrians. The ruling class embraced a Western neoliberal agenda, worsening social inequality and promoting political violence.

of State, June 2024), <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/syria/>.

<sup>12</sup> World Bank, “Gross Domestic Product for Syrian Arab Republic (MKTGDPSYA646NWDB),” FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, Accessed April 28, 2025, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/MKTGDPSYA646NWDB>.

<sup>13</sup> Mark B. Taylor, *Conflict Financing: What’s Wrong with War Economies?*, NOREF Report (Oslo: Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, May 2013), [files.ethz.ch/isn/164674/738e4d8dd99cc71b53297ad29b01bae1.pdf](https://files.ethz.ch/isn/164674/738e4d8dd99cc71b53297ad29b01bae1.pdf).



In 2005, Syria adopted a national plan to shift from a centrally planned economy to a social market economy, but this led to a crony capitalist system that intensified social divisions and alleviated the middle class. Syria's 'social market economy' experiment fuelled rebellion, highlighting international policy's tendency to reinforce authoritarian regimes through punitive economic measures without considering internal power dynamics. Western sanctions were imposed on the Syrian regime, targeting government officials and state-owned institutions, but failed as the majority remained invested in the regime's survival.

Despite financial challenges and sanctions, the Syrian banking sector remained operational, with private banks using carry trade strategies to boost profitability. They borrowed government money at low interest rates and invested it in foreign assets. This resilience demonstrates how authoritarian governments maintain financial stability during crises. Economic sanctions hampered international investment and technology progress, while war halted national digital transformation ambitions.<sup>14</sup>

Low living standards, with poor households having more and younger members, fewer employment opportunities, and a higher poverty rate among public and informal sector workers, and also young unemployment, prevailed. However, no extensive literature explains poverty statistics at the government level before the crisis. The UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia reported decreased food and general poverty in 2009. However, these figures are doubtful due to droughts and reduced energy subsidies. The war caused a 54% economic loss in eight years, and the nation's Human Development Index ranking declined.

The 2011 Syrian conflict unleashed unprecedented violence and displacement, with physical capital being among the most devastating consequences. By 2020, the economic toll was estimated at approximately USD 1.2 trillion.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Linda Matar, "Macroeconomic Framework in Pre-conflict Syria," In *Syria: From National Independence to Proxy War*, eds. Linda Matar and Ali Kadri (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, October 10, 2018): 95-113, doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-98458-2\_5; Samer Abboud, "Capital, Business Elites and the Syrian Uprising," In *Actors and Dynamics in the Syrian Conflict's Middle Phase* (Routledge, 2022): 279-300; Ibrahim Alnafra and Sulaiman Mouselli, "Testing the External Shock Narrative of the Conflict on Transition Towards Knowledge Economy in Syria," *Journal of the Knowledge Economy* 15, no. 1 (2024): 958-991, doi.org/10.1007/s13132-023-01121-2.

<sup>15</sup> Syrian Arab Republic and UNDP, *Syrian Arab Republic: Third National MDG Progress Report* (Damascus: State Planning Commission and United Nations Development Programme, 2010), <https://undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/MDGR-2010-En.pdf>;

Syria's oil output from mature fields sharply declined, dropping from a peak of 677,000 barrels per day (BPD) in 2002 to just 353,000 BPD by 2011 (according to the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs CIDOB, in 2011, only 327,000 BPD were produced).<sup>16</sup> However, the conflict led to a decline in oil production, plummeting to merely 97,000 BPD by 2021.<sup>17</sup> Concurrently, the financial sector witnessed significant disruptions. Bank deposits contracted rapidly, while the Syrian stock market suffered considerable losses. The Central Bank of Syria's reserves were around USD 18.5 to USD 20 billion in 2010, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, respectively, and dropped to USD 14 billion by the end of 2011, as reported by the IMF. Similarly, it was around USD 9 billion by 2013 according to the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs,<sup>18</sup> even US sources claimed USD 4 billion by 2013. By 2021, the Syrian pound had significantly depreciated, officially trading at more than 1,250 Syrian Pounds (SYP) per USD and informally at more than 3,000 SYP. The Syrian economy suffered a significant economic downturn due to a 300% inflation spike, negatively impacting employment and consumer purchasing power. The regime's resistance to reforms, infrastructure destruction, and physical capital loss contributed to the economy's fragility. Between 2011 and 2016, the GDP fell USD 51 billion short of the counterfactual, and reconstruction expenditure was estimated at USD 500 billion. The annual budget ballooned from USD 3 billion in 2012 to USD 10 billion in 2013.<sup>19</sup> The war economy model has worsened these dynamics by strengthening the authoritarian regime and neoliberal policies.

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Jeanne Gobat and Kristina Kostial, "Syria's Conflict Economy," *IMF Working Paper No. 16/123* (International Monetary Fund, Washington, D.C., June 2016), [imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2016/wp16123.pdf](http://imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2016/wp16123.pdf); ; Forat Suliman, Homam Khwanda, and RV Ramana Murthy, "An Analysis of the Syrian Economy in the Era of Military Conflict, 2011-2020: The Perspective of Government and Economics," *Journal of Government and Economics* 11 (2023): 100082. doi.org/10.1016/j.jge.2023.100082.

<sup>16</sup> Samer Hamati, *Les chiffres et le profil de la pauvreté antérieurs au conflit en Syrie*-Figures and Profile of Poverty Before the Conflict in Syria, *One Pager*, no. 428 (Brasília: Centre international de politiques pour la croissance inclusive, September 2019), [repositorio.ipea.gov.br/bitstream/11058/14917/2/fr\\_OP428FR\\_Les\\_chiffres\\_et\\_le\\_p\\_rofil\\_de\\_la\\_pauvrete.pdf](http://repositorio.ipea.gov.br/bitstream/11058/14917/2/fr_OP428FR_Les_chiffres_et_le_p_rofil_de_la_pauvrete.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Layth Alkhani, *Syrian Oil Production 2006-2021*, PH240 course report (Stanford University, December 10, 2023), [large.stanford.edu/courses/2023/ph240/alkhani2/](https://large.stanford.edu/courses/2023/ph240/alkhani2/).

<sup>18</sup> Eckart Woertz, *Syria's War Economy and Prospects of Reconstruction*, Nota Internacional CIDOB 77 (Barcelona: CIDOB, September 2013), [cidob.org/en/publications/syrias-war-economy-and-prospects-reconstruction](http://cidob.org/en/publications/syrias-war-economy-and-prospects-reconstruction).

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Daher, *The Political Economy of Syria: Deepening Pre-War Orientations* (Beirut: Arab Reform Initiative, 2020); Harun Onder, *A Decade of War in Syria: The Economic Side*, World Bank Working Paper (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, April

The decrease in total investment rate from 20.5% of GDP from 2001 to 2010 to less than 8% of GDP from 2016 to 2020 indicates the performance of both the public and private sectors. Syria’s trade flow was also adversely affected by sanctions and conflict interruptions by 65%. Exports fell by 70% between 2010 and 2015. Agricultural production experienced significant losses, with wheat production dropping 20% and livestock production, including cattle, sheep and goats, dropping by 30%, 40%, and 50%, respectively.<sup>20</sup>

As shown in Table I, the Syrian economy collapsed due to prolonged conflict, authoritarian control, and systemic underdevelopment. The regime’s war economy and opposition to reforms led to corruption and cronyism, necessitating a political and economic overhaul to recover from decades of poor management and elite entrenchment.

**Table I: Economic Collapse during Syrian War**

	2011	2023
GDP	USD 67.5 Billion	USD 9 Billion
Annual Inflation	5.8%*	140% (1) **
Syrian Pound vs US Dollar	45-54 (2)	2,512 to 13,046 (2)
Unemployment	8.6%	13.5%
Youth Unemployment	21.3%	33.5%
Oil Production (barrels per day)	383,000 (3)	90,840 (3)

**Source:** Authors’ own based on Syrian Center for Policy Research (1), exchangerates.org (2) and US Energy Information Administration (3) data. \*November 2011-December 2023  
\*\*\* Total oil production of which 90% was controlled by US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces.

2022), thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/ebb9b060753b7019705d1dfe9fe2e35-0280032021/original/April-22-Harun-OnderA-Decade-of-War-in-Syria-The-Economic-Side.pdf; Reuters, “Exclusive: Syria Retains 26 Tons of Gold Reserves after Assad’s Fall,” December 16, 2024, reuters.com/markets/commodities/syria-retains-26-tons-gold-reserves-after-assads-fall-sources-2024-12-16/.

20 Navvar Saban, “Factbox: Iranian Influence and Presence in Syria,” *MENASource* (Atlantic Council), November 5, 2020, atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/factbox-iranian-influence-and-presence-in-syria/; Vladimir M. Akhmedov, “The Syrian Revolution,” In *Handbook of Revolutions in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The New Waves of Revolutions, and the Causes and Effects of Disruptive Political Change* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022): 707-723; Ibrahim Alnafrah and Sulaiman Mouselli, “Testing the External Shock Narrative of the Conflict on Transition Towards Knowledge Economy in Syria,” *Journal of the Knowledge Economy* 15, no. 1 (2024): 958-991, doi.org/10.1007/s13132-023-01121-2.

## **Tug of War**

Civil wars have frequently turned into proxy battles by great powers, as shown in the US-Soviet operations in Vietnam and Afghanistan. The Syrian conflict evolved into a major geopolitical contest between the US and the Russian Federation, transforming what began as a domestic uprising into a theatre for great power rivalry. Both powers sought to assert influence over the regional balance of power, resulting in prolonged military entanglements and the erosion of established global alliances. Iran's strategic expansionism further compounded regional tensions, as Tehran leveraged the conflict to bolster its influence through proxy networks and support for the Assad regime.

Concurrently, China's growing economic and political presence in the region reflected a more restrained and non-interventionist posture, diverging from the overt militarised approaches of the US and Russia. Ramifications of the conflict extended beyond Syria's borders, reshaping the ideological and operational framework of the Ba'athist regime and destabilising regional dynamics.

Initiated in 2011 amidst the broader Arab Spring, the Syrian uprising led to a complex nexus of international sanctions, external military support for opposition groups, and intensified sectarian divisions. The country, hence, became a geopolitical flashpoint, drawing in both regional actors and global powers, thereby escalating the conflict's duration and severity.

The absence of a coherent and consistent US strategy contributed to uncertainty among regional allies and allowed adversarial actors such as Iran and Russia to consolidate their positions. The conflict functioned as a de facto proxy war: while Russia intervened militarily to preserve the Assad government and secure its strategic footholds, the US aimed to curtail the influence of both Russia and Iran, albeit through fragmented support to opposition forces. This asymmetry in strategic clarity and commitment further entrenched the conflict and weakened the prospects for a negotiated resolution. In fact, Washington's cautious approach to confronting the Assad regime directly reflected strategic risk aversion rather than disengagement. On the other hand, Russia provided unwavering support to Assad, utilising military aid and diplomatic influence to secure its interests.

Initially, Russia urged the West against military intervention in Syria without a United Nations mandate, citing international law. Then-Foreign Minister stated that Russia would not engage in war and warned against repeating past mistakes,

saying such intervention would violate international law. Saudi Arabia's stance had changed towards diplomacy with Assad.<sup>21</sup>

Before the intervention, Russia vetoed US resolutions three times and opposed intervention while asserting its role as a stabiliser; Moscow officially continued to call for 'no military intervention' against Syria. However, Syria strategically remained a key Russian arms importer and hosted Moscow's vital Mediterranean naval base. Russia's 2015 intervention in Syria intensified US-Russia tensions and diverted global attention from Ukraine. Moscow's military actions fortified Assad's regime, challenged Western influence and sought to curb Islamic extremism, reinforcing its geopolitical stature. Advocating a dual sovereignty model, the Kremlin manoeuvred to secure strategic interests and reinforce its great power status, counter Western dominance, and assert its non-Western identity, strengthening its alliance with Iran despite military frictions. Moscow expanded cooperation through diplomacy, jointly navigating post-war complexities. This intervention underscored Russia's ambitions to reshape global power dynamics, leveraging Syria as a strategic foothold while balancing diverging military and economic interests with regional and international actors.<sup>22</sup>

The Arab Spring exposed regional instability and prompted US engagement to safeguard its diplomatic, economic, and military interests. The emergence of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) and Iran's expansion, backed by Russia, challenged US-led security frameworks.

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<sup>21</sup> Alexei Anishchuk, "Russia Warns against Military Intervention in Syria," *Reuters*, August 26, 2013, [reuters.com/article/world/russia-warns-against-military-intervention-in-syria-idUSBRE97P0G2/?utm\\_source=twitter&utm\\_medium=social](https://reuters.com/article/world/russia-warns-against-military-intervention-in-syria-idUSBRE97P0G2/?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social); Tugce Varol Sevim and Merve Sune Ozel, "Rethinking Russian Mission in Syria," *European Scientific Journal* 9, no. 19 (2013); Nageen Ashraf, "Syria as a Shatter Belt and the Great Power Competition," *Margalla Papers* 26, no. 2 (2022): 28-38, [doi.org/10.54690/margallapapers.26.2.111](https://doi.org/10.54690/margallapapers.26.2.111); Mohamed, Ragab and Arisha, "Qualitative Analysis Methods Review.," Kasim Ileri, "The Implications of Great Power Politics in the Decade Long Syrian Civil War," *Insan ve Toplum* 14, no. 1 (2024): 1-23. [doi.org/10.12658/m0714](https://doi.org/10.12658/m0714).

<sup>22</sup> Seth G. Jones and Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., *The Evolution of Russian and Iranian Cooperation in Syria* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 8, 2022), [csis.org/analysis/evolution-russian-and-iranian-cooperation-syria](https://www.csis.org/analysis/evolution-russian-and-iranian-cooperation-syria); Greg Simons, "Russia as a Powerful Broker in Syria: Hard and Soft Aspects," *KnE Social Sciences* (2021): 418-432, [doi.org/10.18502/kss.v5i2.8385](https://doi.org/10.18502/kss.v5i2.8385); Ohannes Guekjian, "The Objectives of Russia's Military Intervention in Syria," *The Maghreb Review* 42, no. 3 (2017): 274-306, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tmr.2017.0009>.

With the rise of the Arab Spring, the US increased military and economic support to its allies to counter the influence of ISIS and Iran.<sup>23</sup> It was argued by analysts that the US should restrict its military interventions to three key regions: Europe, the Persian Gulf, and Northeast Asia, with emphasis on securing vital oil resources spanning from the eastern Mediterranean to the Arabian Sea.<sup>24</sup> Although Syria does not possess significant oil reserves, its geopolitical relevance lies in its connection to broader US security objectives and the imperative to counterbalance shifting regional power dynamics.

In 2012, then-US President Barack Obama articulated a 'red line' warning the Syrian government against the use of chemical weapons on civilians.<sup>25</sup> This threshold was tested with reported chemical attacks in Khalidiya, Homs in 2012, and more notably with sarin gas attacks in Eastern Ghouta and Moadamiyah in 2013. These incidents triggered international condemnation and heightened calls for intervention. Although debates persisted regarding the attribution and verification of the evidence, the US, along with Britain and France, maintained that the Syrian regime was responsible and advocated for punitive military action.<sup>26</sup>

In contrast, Russia advanced a diplomatic initiative, subsequently known as the 'chemical weapons for peace' plan, that aimed to dismantle Syria's chemical arsenal under international supervision. This move not only defused immediate tensions but also reinforced emerging international norms against the use of chemical weapons. China and Russia, meanwhile, highlighted the necessity of obtaining United Nations Security Council (UNSC) authorisation for any military

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<sup>23</sup> Antonio Perra, "From the Arab Spring to the Damascus Winter: The United States, Russia, and the New Cold War," *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 3, no. 4 (2016): 363-386, doi.org/10.1177/2347798916664578; Ambassador (Ret.) James F. Jeffrey, statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee, U.S. Policy and Strategy in the Middle East, December 14, 2017, in *Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing on U.S. Policy and Strategy in the Middle East*, armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Jeffrey\_12-14-17.pdf; Dong Mingyang, "The Impact of Middle Eastern Turmoil on U.S. National Security: Causes, Consequences, and Countermeasures," *Advances in Economics, Management and Political Sciences* 133, no. 1 (2025): 55-60, doi.org/10.54254/2754-1169/2025.19681.

<sup>24</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "America Unhinged," *The National Interest* 129 (2014): 9-30. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44151042>.

<sup>25</sup> CNN, "Obama Warns Al-Assad Against Chemical Weapons, Declares 'The World is Watching,'" December 3, 2012, edition.cnn.com/2012/12/03/world/meast/syria-civil-war/index.html.

<sup>26</sup> Yue Hanjing and Ying Zhu, "Great Power Game around the Chemical Weapons Attacks in Syria and the New Norm on Banning Chemical Weapons," *Scholars Journal of Economics, Business and Management* 7, no. 9 (2020): 304-312, doi.org/10.36347/SJEBM.2020.V07I09.004.



response, expressing concern over what they viewed as premature or potentially unsubstantiated evidence presented by Western powers.

The divergence in international approaches underlined deeper geopolitical fractures in normative debates about sovereignty, intervention, and the credibility of multilateral institutions in responding to security and humanitarian crises. In 2014, the US again conducted airstrikes and maintained troops in Syria against the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. However, the legal and strategic justifications for this intervention had become increasingly tenuous as the conflict had evolved to include Iranian-backed militias aligned with the Assad regime.

The US military's footprint in Syria caused risks of confrontation with pro-Assad forces, including Iran and Russia. Washington's position on Syria centred on four objectives: managing the humanitarian situation, reducing violence, sustaining pressure on IS by a continuous military presence in eastern Syria, and supporting Israel's right to self-defence.<sup>27</sup> Also, occupation and indirect control of Syria's eastern oil fields by US-backed Kurdish forces, combined with sweeping economic sanctions, represent a modern iteration of economic warfare aimed at regime containment and conditional political transformation.

During the Syrian conflict, private financing from Gulf-based businesses began supporting various Islamist brigades, often without direct state oversight. This informal funding network enabled external actors in the war economy that included international or Islamic non-governmental organisations, charities, and foundations, to operate with limited scrutiny, sometimes masking or enabling abusive practices under the guise of humanitarian or religious assistance.<sup>28</sup>

ISIS is reported to have received substantial financial support through foreign donations and private Gulf-based financiers, colloquially referred to as 'angel investors,' who facilitated domestic operations within Syria. Private donors in permissive financial jurisdictions such as Kuwait and Qatar played a key role in sustaining ISIS and other extremist groups. Saudi Arabia's promotion of a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam, coupled with its geopolitical rivalry with Iran, contributed to the proliferation of sectarian proxy conflicts across the

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<sup>27</sup> Tess Bridgeman and Brianna Rosen, "Still at War: The United States in Syria," *Just Security*, April 29, 2022, [justsecurity.org/81313/still-at-war-the-united-states-in-syria/](https://justsecurity.org/81313/still-at-war-the-united-states-in-syria/).

<sup>28</sup> European Parliament, Directorate-General for External Policies, Policy Department, *The Financing of the 'Islamic State' in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)*, In-Depth Analysis, IDAN/2017/603835 (Brussels: European Parliament, September 2017), [europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2017/603835/EXPO\\_IDA\(2017\)603835\\_EN.pdf](https://europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2017/603835/EXPO_IDA(2017)603835_EN.pdf).

region.<sup>29</sup> Qatar's role has drawn particular scrutiny. An interview conducted by Al Jazeera with Abu Muhammad al-Joulani, the leader of Syria's al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra, has been interpreted by some analysts as evidence of Qatar's attempt to project extremist actors as legitimate political entities, combining narratives of religious extremism with themes of governance and local stability. Furthermore, Qatar has reportedly paid substantial ransoms up to USD 1 billion, to secure the release of hostages held by extremist factions, including former al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria. While these actions may have been framed as humanitarian or diplomatic efforts, critics argue that such financial flows inadvertently legitimised and strengthened destabilising non-state actors.<sup>30</sup>

Iran's involvement in the Syrian conflict has been officially justified on the basis of national security imperatives, including the preservation of regional influence, protection of alliances, particularly with the Assad regime, and containment of Sunni extremist groups near its borders. Tehran has consistently maintained that its intervention was not driven by sectarian or ethnic motivations. However, competing narratives complicate this position. In 2018, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) alleged that Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, had called for fighting in Syria to protect Shi'a holy sites, thereby framing the intervention in explicitly sectarian terms. A similar narrative resurfaced in 2025, when the news agency 'Iran International' reported that Iran's discourse around its involvement continued to emphasise the safeguarding of Shi'a Islamic shrines as a central rationale.

While such narratives may serve domestic and ideological purposes, they also suggest the intertwining of strategic, religious, and symbolic factors in shaping Iran's regional military posture. Iran perceived the removal of Assad as a threat and has provided military and financial assistance. Syria-Iran ties are unique, mixing ideological differences with shared objectives in opposing the US and Israel. Iran saw Syria as its gateway to the Arab world, which it used as clout in negotiations with Israel. Since 2000, the alliance has become stronger despite poor relations with Arab nations.

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<sup>29</sup> Eckart Woertz, *How Long Will ISIS Last Economically?*, Nota Internacional CIDOB 98 (Barcelona: CIDOB, October 2014), [cidob.org/en/publications/how-long-will-isis-last-economically](http://cidob.org/en/publications/how-long-will-isis-last-economically).

<sup>30</sup> Osarodion Odosamamwen Izevbogie, "Roots and Goals of the State of Qatar's Contradictory Foreign Policy: Implications for U.S. National Security Interests," (Master's thesis, Missouri State University, 2019), <https://bearworks.missouristate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4473&context=theses>.



Due to its belief that Syria's security was essential to its own, Iran sold military hardware and made economic investments to the country. Iran's military intervention shown in Figures V and VI began in late 2011, initially with financial aid, arms, and communication disruption. Iran used 'Husseiniat Scouts' to recruit Shi'a volunteers for its 'Protecting Shia Shrines' campaign. According to the IDF, by early 2012, Iran had deployed Quds Force operatives. Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah fighters supported Assad's regime, peaking at 2,500 troops alongside 20,000 allied forces, strengthening Iranian-Russian military ties and securing 131 military sites by 2020. Iran's actions had profound implications for Middle Eastern security, affecting Hezbollah's capabilities, regional stability, and the interests of countries like the US, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and Israel.<sup>31</sup> The Geopolitical Intelligence Services AG reported that a decade of involvement in Syria cost Iran around USD 100 billion. Militia salaries were financed through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) budget, which was estimated at approximately USD 7.6 billion.<sup>32</sup>

Türkiye launched the 'Euphrates Shield' military operation to prevent Kurdish-led forces from gaining territory along the border, fearing that their success fuelled domestic movements. Türkiye's engagement in Syria was to prevent the formation of a Kurdish political entity on its southern border, enhance regional influence through opposition backing, and create a buffer zone.<sup>33</sup>

On the other hand, Israel faced a complex situation in the Syrian civil war, balancing hostility towards Assad, Islamist fear, Hezbollah's increased combat role, and geopolitical risks with Russia and Iran, with limited strategies to deter threats.<sup>34</sup> So, with the collapse of Assad's rule, Israel imposed a 'preemptive intervention' policy against the new Syrian administration, destroying military infrastructure,

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<sup>31</sup> Abdullah H. Al-Moussawi, "Iran and the Syrian Crisis," *Journal of US-China Public Administration* 14, no. 3 (2017): 136-144, doi: 10.17265/1548-6591/2017.03.002; Ephraim Kam, "Iranian Military Intervention in Syria: A New Approach," *Strategic Assessment* 20, no. 2 (2017): 9-21, inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/fe-2484474937.pdf; Saban, "Factbox: Iranian Influence and Presence in Syria."

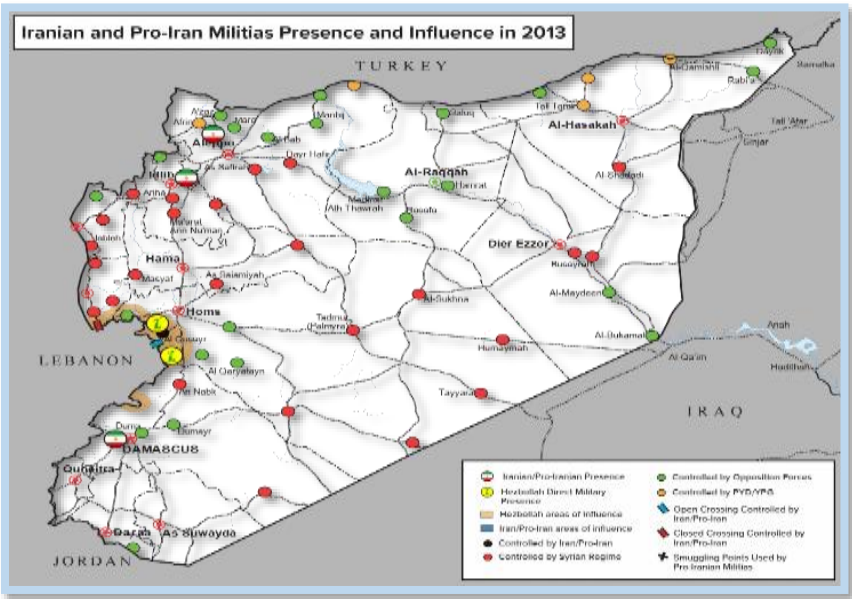
<sup>32</sup> Amatzia Baram, "Iran's Stakes in Syria", *GIS Reports*, October 28, 2021, [gisreportsonline.com/r/iran-syria/](https://gisreportsonline.com/r/iran-syria/).

<sup>33</sup> Sebastian Franzkowiak, "Only the Dead Have Seen the End of the War-How to Make Sense of Turkey's Involvement in Syria," In *Europe – Against the Tide*, eds. Matthias Waechter and Hartmut Marhold (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG, 2019): 147-58; Gencer Özcan and Soli Özel, "Turkey and the Syrian Crisis," In *The Struggle to Reshape the Middle East in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Samer S. Shehata (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023):129-53.

<sup>34</sup> Ariel (Eli) Levite, "An Israeli Perspective on Syria," *Carnegie Middle East Center* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), June 9, 2014, [carnegieendowment.org/research/2014/06/an-israeli-perspective-on-syria?lang=en](https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2014/06/an-israeli-perspective-on-syria?lang=en).

occupying new territories, and disarming southern Syria to establish a security zone. The policy aims to protect minorities, particularly Druze and Kurds, and prevent Syria from becoming a base for Türkish-backed Islamist movements. In the short-term, Israel aims to secure its borders under its ‘forward defence’ doctrine, while in the long-term, it seeks to keep the new Syrian regime weak and prevent Türkish influence from deepening.<sup>35</sup>

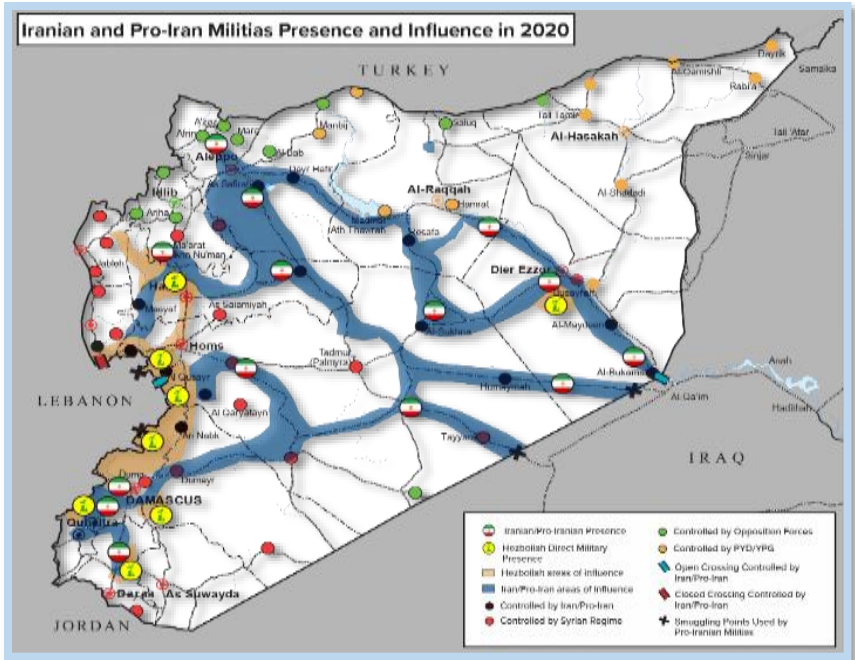
**Figure V: Iranian and Pro-Iran Militias Presence in Syria (2013)**



**Source:** Saban, “Factbox: Iranian Influence and Presence in Syria.”

<sup>35</sup> EPC, “Israel’s Policy in Syria: Military Intervention and Reliance on Minorities,” *Emirates Policy Center*, April 9, 2025, [epc.ae/en/details/brief/israel-s-policy-in-syria-military-intervention-and-reliance-on-minorities](https://epc.ae/en/details/brief/israel-s-policy-in-syria-military-intervention-and-reliance-on-minorities).

**Figure VI: Iranian and Pro-Iran Militias Presence in Syria (2020)**



**Source:** Saban, “Factbox: Iranian Influence and Presence in Syria.”

## Hope After Rubble

The demise of the Assad administration in Syria in December 2024 represented a watershed moment in the country’s history. The new government, led by Ahmad al-Sharaa (earlier known by his *nom de guerre* Abu Mohammad al-Jolani), is confronted with many difficulties. However, despite political division, economic suffering, and security threats, Syria’s transfer to al-Sharaa offers a vital chance for renewal. On 13 March, al-Sharaa issued a constitutional declaration establishing ‘Islam’ as the country’s religion and Islamic jurisprudence as the primary source of legislation during a five-year transition phase. The declaration calls for an independent judiciary, freedom of expression, media freedom, and protections for women’s political, educational, and employment rights.

Restoring legitimacy and confidence will need a comprehensive reform plan and its execution. Credible transitional justice, inclusive political procedures, and an open election. This shift must be supported by an inclusive and holistic framework. The new administration is developing a comprehensive plan for Syria’s

reconstruction. Syria's Minister of Economy and Industry has declared that this is the beginning of a difficult path.<sup>36</sup>

Syrians have exhibited resilience by adopting local survival solutions in the face of extreme violence, such as maintaining essential services in places like Damascus and Aleppo through solar energy, grassroots initiatives, and small businesses. However, the effectiveness of these solutions is doubtful owing to national difficulties that need cooperation and resources beyond local capacity. Syrian society's divided structure has weakened community trust, demanding inclusive administration to represent multiple political factions while avoiding alienation.

The international community needs to play an important role in Syria's rehabilitation<sup>37</sup> just as eagerly as great powers engaged in proxy warfare. Lifting restrictions on financial institutions and enabling international investment are crucial for maintaining stability. Empowering the commercial and civil sectors may increase trust and lessen government pressure.

## Conclusion

The Syrian conflict began and escalated into one of the deadliest and most complex civil wars of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The Assad regime's authoritarian grip, which was rooted in sectarian loyalty and crony economic experiments, proved brittle in the face of public dissent and social inequality. The Arab Spring may have served as a catalyst, but the deeper fault lines were embedded in decades of socioeconomic mismanagement, class-based marginalisation, and political repression.

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<sup>36</sup> Tamer Qarmout, "Rebuilding Syria Requires Much More than Bricks and Mortar," *Al Jazeera*, December 22, 2024, [aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/12/22/rebuilding-syria-requires-much-more-than-bricks-and-mortar](https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/12/22/rebuilding-syria-requires-much-more-than-bricks-and-mortar); Bilal Mahli, *Syria's Post-Conflict Recovery: Challenges and Prospects for Reconstruction and Stability*, Policy Brief No. 22/25 (Rabat: Policy Center for the New South, April 11, 2025), [https://policycenter.ma/sites/default/files/2025-04/PB-22-25%20\(Bilal%20Mahli\).pdf](https://policycenter.ma/sites/default/files/2025-04/PB-22-25%20(Bilal%20Mahli).pdf); United Nations Security Council, "Syria, April 2025 Monthly Forecast," *Security Council Report Monthly Forecast*, March 31, 2025, [securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2025-04/syria-78.php](https://securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2025-04/syria-78.php).

<sup>37</sup> Sinan Hatahet, "Syria's Post-Assad Honeymoon Is Over. Now the Hard Work of State-Building Begins," *New Atlanticist*, January 23, 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/syrias-post-assad-honeymoon-is-over-now-the-hard-work-of-state-building-begins/>.

The war's economic toll has been catastrophic, with over half of Syria's population displaced, a 60% contraction in GDP, and estimated infrastructure damage in the hundreds of billions.

Syria also became a proxy battlefield for global and regional powers seeking geopolitical dominance, each with divergent agendas, converting the country's soil into a theatre of competition. Beyond the Syrian borders, the conflict starkly warns that fragile states can become arenas for geopolitical confrontation, where domestic grievances are internationalised and prolonged by external interests. Syria requires political talks with civil society organisations, minorities, and displaced people. Long-term peace development and reconstruction projects need transitional justice and reconciliation principles. Local entrepreneurship can help develop unity. The government in Damascus should establish systems to strengthen social unity in the country. The new government, despite breaking from Assad's rule, is fragile and lacks broad inclusiveness, causing concerns about external alignment with Western and Israeli interests. Its limited engagement with minorities and political factions risks deepening internal divides.

International mediation tends to be most effective when it is initiated at early stages of civil unrest, where timely intervention can help prevent escalation into full-scale conflict. For such efforts to succeed, major powers must refrain from instrumentalising civil conflicts for their own political or strategic interests and instead commit to establishing clear normative boundaries that prioritise conflict resolution over geopolitical competition. Regional organisations should be empowered to mediate internal conflicts before they become internationalised. Resilience-based development models should prioritise inclusive economic reforms, equitable development, and social welfare over elite-centric neoliberalism. Conflict-sensitive sanctions should target regimes without paralysing civilian life; humanitarian carve-outs should be prioritised to avoid deepening suffering. Interpreting Syria's protracted conflict as a convergence of internal state collapse and external geopolitical competition offers a more holistic foundation for formulating effective policy responses and conflict mitigation strategies.

***Husnain Shehzad is an MPhil Scholar at the School of Economics, Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, Islamabad. Email: <husnain.eco24@pide.edu.pk>. Zubair Ahmed is a PhD Scholar at the School of Economics, Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, Islamabad. Email: <Zubair.Phdeco24@pide.edu.pk>.***