

Syria: No Lost Generation

Background for Educators



Capital: Damascus
Largest city: Aleppo
President: Bashar al-Assad
Population (July 2012 estimate): 22,530,746
Official language: Arabic
Major ethnic groups: Arabs (Sunni Muslim): 59.1%, Alawites (Shi'a Muslim, Arabic speaking): 11.8%, Levantines (Christian, Arabic speaking): 9.3%, Kurds (mostly Sunni Muslim): 8.9%, others: 10.9%
Area – comparative: slightly larger than North Dakota
Economic classification (pre-war): Lower middle income (\$2,610 gross national income per capita (2010))
SOURCES: CIA World Factbook, Reuters, World Bank, Al-Arabiya

Background to the Conflict

Syria, or the Syrian Arab Republic, is a multiethnic country ruled by a minority ethnic group since 1970, when Hafiz al-Assad launched a bloodless coup and established authoritarian rule. He installed loyalists in key government positions, many of whom were from his Alawite sect (an offshoot of Shi'a Islam), and he suppressed dissent violently. Power transferred to Hafiz al-Assad's son, Bashar al-Assad, upon the former's death in 2000, but hopes for political reform were not fulfilled. Beginning in 2008, though, Syria gradually began to improve its foreign affairs, and the economy grew rapidly amid economic liberalization.

From Clashes to Civil War

However, the growth was not felt uniformly, and by 2010 the youth unemployment rate was still around 20 percent. In 2011, discontent among Syrians in response to economic pressures and the lack of political reform reflected the mood elsewhere in the Middle East—Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, and Libya—where popular protests had already begun to topple governments. In March, the so-called “Arab Spring” came to Syria, as children and teenagers in the city of Daraa were arrested for painting anti-government graffiti on the walls of a school. When demonstrators demanded that they be released, the police cracked down and dozens of protesters were killed. The president, facing calls for his resignation, promised changes, but then the regime ordered troops into Daraa to clamp down on the protests. Since that time violence has increased between Assad's forces and rebel groups fighting to bring down the government. In July 2012 the Red Cross declared the conflict a civil war.

Over the years, the stalemated conflict became more violent and complex. The Free Syrian Army, led by generals who defected from Assad's army, does not fight government forces alone; al-Qaeda-linked jihadist fighters have also joined the effort. Meanwhile, the government is supported by Iran and Russia, the latter of which has opposed United Nations intervention with its veto on the Security Council. As the Syrian war nears its third anniversary in March 2014, more than 140,000 lives had been lost. Though both sides have been accused of committing human rights abuses, it is widely believed that the Assad regime is responsible for a chemical weapons attack near Damascus that killed hundreds of people and sickened thousands of others.



Maarat al-Numaan, Syria, 2013

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International Attempts at Peace

Despite almost two years of diplomacy, the United Nations had little to show for its efforts besides a 2012 international agreement called the Geneva Communiqué, which pledged support for a transitional governing body to be mutually agreed to by the present government and opposition and other groups. On January 25, 2014, the UN hosted talks in Switzerland, called Geneva 2, between the government and opposition to follow up on that agreement. However, by February 14, the talks had become deadlocked, with the government showing no interest in replacing President Assad. The conference broke up the next day, and each faction accused the other side of trying to derail the talks.

U.S. Policy on Syria

The United States has been cautious in its support for the Syrian rebels. However, President Obama warned Assad that Syria's use of its chemical weapons, prohibited by international agreement, would constitute a "red line" for the U.S. That line was crossed in summer 2013 with Assad's alleged chemical weapons attack. Amid great debate about the legality and consequences of U.S. military intervention, the Russian government unexpectedly helped to negotiate a deal in which the Syrian government agreed to have all of its chemical weapons destroyed. The U.S. maintains a watchful eye on the situation.

As of February 2014, the U.S. policy toward Syria remains that of limited action. It is committed to developing strategy with the moderate opposition and providing them with nonlethal assistance. The U.S. is also pushing for a political settlement between the Syrian government and the moderate opposition for regime change. On the humanitarian side, a recent additional pledge will bring the total to more than \$1.7 billion in aid since the crisis began.²

A Humanitarian Emergency

As Syria's war begins its fourth painful year, it has escalated to one of the most brutal conflicts the world has witnessed in recent decades. Countless homes, schools, clinics, hospitals, water and sanitation systems, and essential community infrastructures have been destroyed or severely damaged. Large-scale displacement is resulting in over-crowded shelters both inside Syria and in the neighboring countries of Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq. The capacity



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Encampment for internally displaced persons in Syria, near the border with Turkey

1 Ambassador Robert S. Ford, "Opening Statement Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee" (testimony, U.S. Senate, Washington, DC, October 31, 2013), accessed February 17, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/216163.htm>.

2 "Syria," United States Agency for International Development, last updated February 20, 2014, <http://www.usaid.gov/crisis/syria>.

of host communities to support fleeing Syrians is overstretched. Violence makes it dangerous for people to gain access to education, water, food, and health care services.

The threats to children are both physical and emotional. Over five million children's lives—both in Syria and those who have been forced to leave—have been devastated, and an entire generation is at risk. Child refugees, now numbering over one million, make up half of all refugees from the Syrian conflict, according to UNICEF and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The latest figures show that more than 740,000 Syrian refugees are under the age of 11. They arrive in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and other neighboring countries in desperate condition, having walked for days, often under fire. Inside Syria, some 10,000 children have been killed during the conflict, according to the United Nations Security Council. Tens of thousands more have been injured. UNHCR and UNICEF estimate of the 6.5 million people displaced, almost 3 million are children. Months and months of unspeakable horrors have left children in a deep state of fear and distress. Parents are reporting their children cling to them more, have recurring nightmares, and are afraid of loud noises. These are the invisible scars of the conflict.

UNICEF in Action

Despite the intense violence and challenges in access and security, UNICEF has managed to scale up its response and presence inside Syria. UNICEF's services and supplies have reached hundreds of thousands of children, including many living in opposition-held areas, delivered by aid convoys and through its partners. These convoys have delivered lifesaving supplies to people in some of the hardest to reach areas where heavy fighting is taking place, such as Aleppo.

UNICEF provides children inside Syria and among refugee populations with clean water, sanitation, and health services including immunization, as well as opportunities to catch up on missed schooling. To date, the agency has provided psychosocial support and learning programs for close to 335,000 children. UNICEF also helps to ensure children are protected against the risks of being caught in areas of active conflict, recruitment into armed forces and militias, and sexual exploitation. And throughout the region, UNICEF and its partners are establishing child-friendly spaces—safe places where children can play, socialize, and act like children again each day.

For the children of Syria, the crisis is an unprecedented emergency, unique in its magnitude, depth, and scope. UNICEF has pledged to do “anything and everything” to support families as the region struggles with unimaginable circumstances.

For the most up-to-date information and numbers from the ground, visit UNICEF's Humanitarian Action for Children site for Syria (unicef.org/appeals/Syria.html)



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Safa (right), 6, laughs with her twin sister, Marwa (left), and 9-year-old sister, Aya (center), in Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan. There, Safa regularly receives physical therapy due to losing her right leg during an attack in Syria. After school in Za'atari, she spends her afternoons in a child-friendly space.

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