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THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

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Abstract:

The Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011, represents one of the most complex and devastating conflicts of the 21st century, marked by widespread humanitarian crises, regional instability, and international intervention. This research paper explores the roots and evolution of the conflict, tracing its origins from peaceful protests during the Arab Spring to a multi-faceted war involving government forces, rebel groups, Islamist factions, and foreign powers. It analyses the socio-political conditions that fuelled the uprising, including authoritarian governance, economic disparity, and sectarian tensions. The study also examines the roles of major international actors such as the United States, Russia, Iran, and Turkey, and the implications of their involvement on the war's trajectory and resolution efforts. Furthermore, the paper assesses the impact of the conflict on civilian populations, including mass displacement, human rights violations, and the refugee crisis. By synthesizing political, historical, and humanitarian perspectives, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Syrian Civil War and its broader geopolitical consequences.

Keywords: Syrian Civil War, Arab Spring, authoritarianism, sectarian conflict, humanitarian crisis, foreign intervention, United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, refugee crisis, displacement, human rights, Middle East politics, international relations.

Introduction to Syria and Syria during 1970s:

In the 1970s, Syria's population was predominantly Sunni Muslim, comprising an estimated **70-75%** of the total population. This included Arabs, Kurds, and smaller ethnic groups. The **Shia Muslim population**, including Alawites, Twelver Shia, and Ismailis, made up approximately **10-15%** of the population. The Alawites, a Shia sect, were particularly significant as they held key positions in the military and government, especially after Hafez al-Assad, an Alawite, took power in 1970. Other religious groups, such as Christians (around 10%) and Druze (about 3%), also contributed to Syria's diverse religious landscape.

In the 1970s, Syria's population was experiencing steady growth, reflecting broader demographic trends in the region. At the beginning of the decade, the population was estimated to be

around 6.3 million and continued to rise due to high birth rates and improvements in healthcare. The majority of Syrians lived in rural areas, although urbanization was increasing, with cities like Damascus and Aleppo expanding. The country was also characterized by a diverse ethnic and religious composition, including Arabs, Kurds, Armenians, and various Christian and Muslim sects. Economic and political changes during this period, particularly under President Hafez al-Assad, influenced migration patterns and urban development, setting the stage for Syria's continued population growth in the following decades.

Bashar al-Assad rule:

Bashar al-Assad became the President of Syria on **July 17, 2000**, following the death of his father, **Hafez al-Assad**, who had ruled the country for nearly 30 years. Initially, there were hopes for political and economic reforms, especially during the short-lived "**Damascus Spring**", which saw increased political discussions and calls for liberalization. However, Assad soon shifted towards a more authoritarian approach, cracking down on dissent and consolidating power.

Throughout the 2000s, his government maintained tight control over the country, strengthening the role of the **Ba'ath Party** and the security apparatus. He pursued economic modernization efforts, introducing limited market reforms and privatization, but widespread corruption and economic inequality persisted. Syria also faced tensions in foreign relations, particularly with the U.S. and neighboring Lebanon, especially after the **2005 assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri**, which many blamed on the Syrian government.

The Arab Spring:

The **Arab Spring** began in **late 2010** and spread across the Middle East and North Africa in **2011**. However, some events in the mid-2000s, including protests, political unrest, and economic struggles, can be seen as early signs of the larger uprisings that followed.

In **2006**, Syria and other Arab countries faced political repression, economic hardship, and growing dissatisfaction among his populations. In Syria, President **Bashar al-Assad** maintained a tight grip on power, suppressing opposition and limiting political freedoms. The **Lebanese political crisis**, especially after the **assassination of Rafik Hariri in 2005**, led to increased tensions, with Syria being forced to withdraw its troops from Lebanon after nearly three decades of occupation. Additionally, Syria faced economic difficulties due to U.S. sanctions and a severe drought that hurt agriculture.

Although 2006 was not part of the **Arab Spring**, it was a period of rising frustration in many Arab nations. These pressures eventually contributed to the massive protests and revolutions that erupted across the region in **2010–2011**, starting in Tunisia and spreading to countries like Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria.

Mouawiya Sayasneh:

In **February 2011**, inspired by the **Arab Spring** protests in Tunisia and Egypt, a group of young boys in **Daraa**, a city in southern Syria, wrote anti-government graffiti on his school wall. The most well-known phrase they wrote was: One of these boys was **Hamza al-Khatib**, along with others like **Mouawiya Sayasneh**. Atef Najib was a cousin of **Bashar al-Assad** and served as the chief of the **Political Security Directorate** in **Daraa**. When a group of schoolboys, inspired by the Arab Spring, wrote anti-regime graffiti on a school wall in February 2011, Najib's forces arrested, detained, and allegedly tortured them. When local tribal leaders pleaded for his release, Najib reportedly insulted them and refused. The Syrian security forces, led by officials loyal to **Bashar al-Assad**, arrested and reportedly tortured them. This sparked widespread anger, leading to protests in Daraa on **March 15, 2011**, which are considered the beginning of the **Syrian Revolution**.

The brutal crackdown by Syrian authorities escalated tensions, eventually leading to nationwide protests and, later, the devastating **Syrian Civil War**.

Spread of the protest:

The protests in **Daraa**, which began in **March 2011**, quickly spread to other parts of **Syria**, marking the start of a nationwide uprising against **Bashar al-Assad's** government.

After the **brutal crackdown** on demonstrators in Daraa, protests erupted in major cities such as **Damascus, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor, Latakia, and Idlib**. The movement, initially calling for reforms and the release of political prisoners, soon escalated into demands for Assad's removal.

By **April 2011**, security forces were using **live ammunition** and **mass arrests** to suppress protests, but instead of stopping the movement, the violence fueled more anger. **Homs** became one of the key centers of resistance, witnessing some of the largest demonstrations. In **Hama**, a city with a history of opposition to the Assad regime, massive protests took place in **July 2011**, leading to another harsh crackdown.

- **Friday of Dignity:**

April 22, 2011 – "Friday of Dignity" was a pivotal day in the **Syrian uprising**. It marked one of the **largest protests** since the start of the movement in March 2011. Tens of thousands of demonstrators across **Daraa, Damascus, Homs, Hama, Baniyas, Latakia, and Aleppo** took to the streets after Friday prayers, demanding **freedom, political reforms, and an end to Bashar al-Assad's rule**.

The Syrian security forces responded with **brutal force**, using **live ammunition, tear gas, and mass arrests** to suppress the protests. Reports estimate that at least **80 to 100 protesters were killed** that day, particularly in **Daraa, Homs, and Damascus suburbs**.

- **Al-Omari Mosque:**

The **Al-Omari Mosque** in **Daraa** is a significant historical and religious site that became a

symbol of the Syrian uprising in 2011. In **March 2011**, as protests against Bashar al-Assad's regime erupted in Daraa, the **Al-Omari Mosque** became a center of resistance. Protesters and activists used it as a gathering point, a **makeshift hospital**, and a shelter for injured demonstrators. On **March 23, 2011**, Syrian security forces stormed the mosque, killing several protesters and arresting many others. This violent attack further enraged the local population and helped spread the protests to other parts of the country.

Formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA):

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) was officially formed on July 29, 2011, by a group of Syrian military defectors who opposed Bashar al-Assad's regime. It was founded by Colonel Riad al-Asaad, a former officer in the Syrian Air Force, along with other defecting soldiers. The FSA declared its goal to protect civilians, overthrow Assad, and establish a democratic Syria.

Flag of Free Syrian army:

Major actors supporting the war:

1. ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria):

The **Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)**, the predecessor of **ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria)**, Initially, during the early stages of the Syrian Civil War in **2011–2012**, both groups fought against the **Syrian government**, but his goals and ideologies were completely different. The FSA was a secular/moderate opposition force seeking to overthrow **Bashar al-Assad**, while ISI, which later evolved into **ISIS**, aimed to establish an **Islamic caliphate**. In **2013**, ISI expanded into Syria and rebranded itself as **ISIS**. Instead of cooperating with the FSA, **ISIS began attacking FSA brigades**, seizing his weapons, and taking control of opposition-held areas. Clashes between the two intensified, particularly in northern Syria, where **ISIS captured towns from the FSA in Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and Aleppo**. By **2014**, ISIS had become a dominant force, overtaking many rebel groups and declaring a caliphate, while the FSA lost significant territory. Ultimately, the relationship between ISI/ISIS and the FSA was one of rivalry and conflict rather than cooperation.

2. Kurd Forces:

In **eastern Syria**, Kurdish forces have played a crucial role in the conflict, particularly in areas like **Hasakah, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor**. The **People's Protection Units (YPG)**, formed in **2011**, became the main Kurdish military force and later led the formation of the **Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)** in **2015**. The **SDF**, a multi-ethnic coalition including Arabs and Assyrians, received strong **U.S. support** in the fight against **ISIS**, leading key offensives to liberate cities like **Raqqa in 2017** and **Deir ez-Zor in 2019**. After ISIS's territorial defeat, the SDF established control over large parts of **eastern Syria**, governing under the **Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES)**. However, Kurdish forces have faced tensions with **the Syrian government, Turkey, and local Arab tribes**, particularly in Deir ez-Zor. Despite ongoing **Turkish threats**, regime

negotiations, and occasional local uprisings, Kurdish forces continue to maintain security in the region, managing ISIS detainees while balancing relations with both the **U.S. and Assad's regime**.

3. Saudi Arabia and Qatar:

Saudi Arabia and Qatar played a significant role in supporting the **Free Syrian Army (FSA)** during the Syrian Civil War, particularly in its early years (2011–2017). Both countries saw the uprising as an opportunity to **weaken Bashar al-Assad's regime**, which was aligned with his regional rival, **Iran**.

4. Russia:

Russia played a crucial role in supporting Bashar al-Assad during the Syrian Civil War, helping his regime survive and regain control over much of the country. Although Russia had been a political and military ally of Syria for decades, its most decisive intervention came in **September 2015**, when it launched a **direct military campaign** to assist Assad. Russian forces provided **airstrikes, advanced weaponry, military advisors, and intelligence support**, which helped Syrian government forces push back opposition and jihadist groups. Russia's **air power** was particularly devastating against rebel strongholds in **Aleppo, Idlib, and Eastern Ghouta**, leading to major victories for Assad's forces. Additionally, Russia used **diplomatic influence** at the United Nations to block Western-backed resolutions against Assad and played a key role in peace negotiations through the **Astana Process** alongside **Iran and Turkey**. The presence of Russian military bases in **Latakia and Tartus** further solidified its long-term influence in Syria. Ultimately, Russia's intervention **shifted the war in Assad's favor**, allowing his regime to survive and regain most of the territory lost to opposition forces.

5. United States:

The **United States** played a significant role in supporting the **Free Syrian Army (FSA)** during the Syrian Civil War, particularly between **2012 and 2017**. The U.S. saw the FSA as a moderate opposition force that could **overthrow Bashar al-Assad's regime** and counter **Iranian and Russian influence** in Syria.

1. **Weapons and Military Aid-** In 2013, the U.S. launched the CIA's "**Timber Sycamore**" program, which provided **weapons, training, and intelligence support** to FSA fighters. The program, conducted in coordination with **Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey**, supplied rebels with **small arms, anti-tank missiles (TOWs), and ammunition**.
2. **Training and Financial Support-** The U.S. trained thousands of FSA fighters in **Jordan and Turkey** as part of a **covert military assistance program**. Millions of dollars in funding were given to FSA factions to support his fight against **Assad and later against ISIS**.
3. **Limited Air Support-** While the U.S. conducted **airstrikes against ISIS**, it did **not** directly target **Assad's forces** except in rare cases, such as the **2017 and 2018 missile strikes**

following chemical attacks. The U.S. also enforced **limited "red lines"**, such as striking Assad's forces when they threatened U.S.-backed rebels.

Damascus bombing:

On **July 18, 2012**, in **Damascus**. This attack, known as the **"Damascus bombing" or "Riyada explosion,"** targeted a high-level security meeting at the **National Security Bureau** headquarters. A **bomb was detonated inside the meeting room**, killing top Syrian officials, including **Defense Minister Dawoud Rajiha, Deputy Defense Minister Assef Shawkat (Bashar al-Assad's brother-in-law), and Hassan Turkmani, a senior military official**. Interior Minister **Mohammed al-Shaar** was also wounded.

The attack was carried out by opposition forces, with some reports suggesting the **Free Syrian Army (FSA)** or Islamist factions like **Liwa al-Islam** were responsible. This was a turning point in the war, weakening Assad's inner circle but failing to collapse his government.

- **Ghouta chemical attack:**

On **August 21, 2013**, the Syrian government was accused of using **chemical weapons** in an attack on opposition-held areas in **Ghouta, near Damascus**. The attack involved **sarin gas**, a deadly nerve agent, and resulted in the deaths of an estimated **1,400 people**, including many women and children. Videos and reports showed victims suffocating, foaming at the mouth, and suffering convulsions, sparking international outrage.

The **United Nations (UN) and independent investigations** later confirmed that sarin was used, and Western countries, including the **United States, France, and the UK**, blamed the **Assad regime** for the attack. The Syrian government, however, denied responsibility and accused opposition forces of staging the attack.

The **Ghouta chemical attack** nearly led to direct U.S. military intervention, as **President Barack Obama** had previously set a **"red line" on the use of chemical weapons**. However, instead of launching airstrikes, the U.S. and **Russia brokered a deal in September 2013** that led to **Syria dismantling its declared chemical weapons stockpile under international supervision**.

- **Use of Veto:**

Russia and China have repeatedly used his veto power at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to block efforts to refer the Syrian government to the International Criminal Court (ICC). Since the start of the Syrian Civil War in **2011**, multiple attempts have been made to hold **Bashar al-Assad's regime accountable for war crimes**, particularly regarding **chemical weapons attacks, mass killings, and human rights abuses**. These vetoes have frustrated the international community, as they have **prevented accountability for atrocities committed during the war**, including **chemical weapons attacks and mass civilian bombings**.

US withdraws its support and later attacked:

In **2016**, Donald Trump was elected **President of the United States**, and during his campaign, **announced a sudden decision to pull U.S. troops out of Syria**, claiming that ISIS had been defeated. This move was met with criticism from military officials, U.S. allies, and even some within his own administration, as ISIS was still considered a threat. The decision led to the **resignation of Defense Secretary James Mattis** and concerns that it would leave Kurdish allies vulnerable to **Turkey**, which considered them terrorists.

In 2017, the Assad regime was accused of using **chemical weapons** again, with the most notable attack occurring on **April 4, 2017**, in **Khan Shaykhun**, a rebel-held town in **Idlib province**. The attack involved **sarin gas**, a deadly nerve agent, and killed over **80 people**, including many women and children. Videos showed victims suffocating, convulsing, and foaming at the mouth, similar to the **2013 Ghouta chemical attack**.

The **United Nations (UN)** and the **Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW)** later confirmed that **sarin was used** and that evidence pointed to the **Syrian government** as the perpetrator. The attack sparked global outrage, and in response, **U.S. President Donald Trump ordered a military strike on April 7, 2017**, targeting the **Shayrat Airbase**, from which the chemical attack was believed to have been launched. The U.S. fired **59 Tomahawk missiles** at the base, marking the **first direct U.S. military action against Assad's forces** in the war. Despite this response, **chemical attacks in Syria continued in later years**, with further incidents reported in **2018 in Douma**, leading to another round of U.S., UK, and French airstrikes against Assad's military facilities.

Present Situation:

As of March 2025, the Syrian conflict, now in its fourteenth year, continues to pose significant challenges, with ongoing violence, humanitarian crises, and complex political dynamics. Recent developments have opened a potential window for advancing peace efforts.

Recent Developments:

- **Leadership Transition:** In December 2024, Ahmed al-Sharaa, formerly affiliated with al-Qaeda, overthrew President Bashar al-Assad. Since assuming power, President Sharaa has sought support from both Arab and Western leaders. Notably, he met with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Cairo to discuss Syria's future and regional stability.
- **Regional Dynamics:** Turkey and Iran have experienced diplomatic tensions. Turkey's Foreign Minister criticized Iran's support for militias in Syria, leading both nations to summon each other's diplomats. This strain reflects the shifting influences in Syria, with Iran's role diminishing and Turkey's presence becoming more pronounced.

Conclusion:

The **Syrian Civil War** is considered one of the most complex conflicts in modern history due

to the involvement of multiple factions, foreign powers, and deep-seated sectarian and political divisions. Approx. 80% of the Syrian population were made poor, many people fled through sea to other countries through other means and more than 4 lakh people have died in this brutal civil war. What began in **2011** as a peaceful uprising against **Bashar al-Assad's regime** quickly escalated into a brutal war involving the **Syrian government, opposition groups, extremist factions, and Kurdish forces**. The war was further complicated by **foreign interventions**, with **Russia and Iran backing Assad**, while the **United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar** supported various opposition forces, each with different priorities. The emergence of **ISIS** in 2014 added another layer, forcing the U.S. and its allies to shift his focus to counterterrorism efforts, while Turkey launched military operations against Kurdish forces, despite his alliance with the U.S. in the fight against ISIS. The conflict was further marked by **chemical weapons attacks, war crimes, mass displacements, and sieges**, leading to one of the worst humanitarian crises of the century. Over time, Assad, with Russian and Iranian support, regained most of the territory, but Syria remains fragmented, with **Turkish-controlled areas in the north, U.S.-backed Kurdish forces in the east, and Islamist rebels in Idlib**, while Israel continues to conduct airstrikes against Iranian targets. The war's combination of **local uprisings, sectarianism, global power struggles, and terrorism** turned Syria into a battleground of international interests, making it one of the most complicated and devastating civil wars in modern history.

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