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Syria

Four years from the start
of the revolution

Arab Network for the Study of Democracy

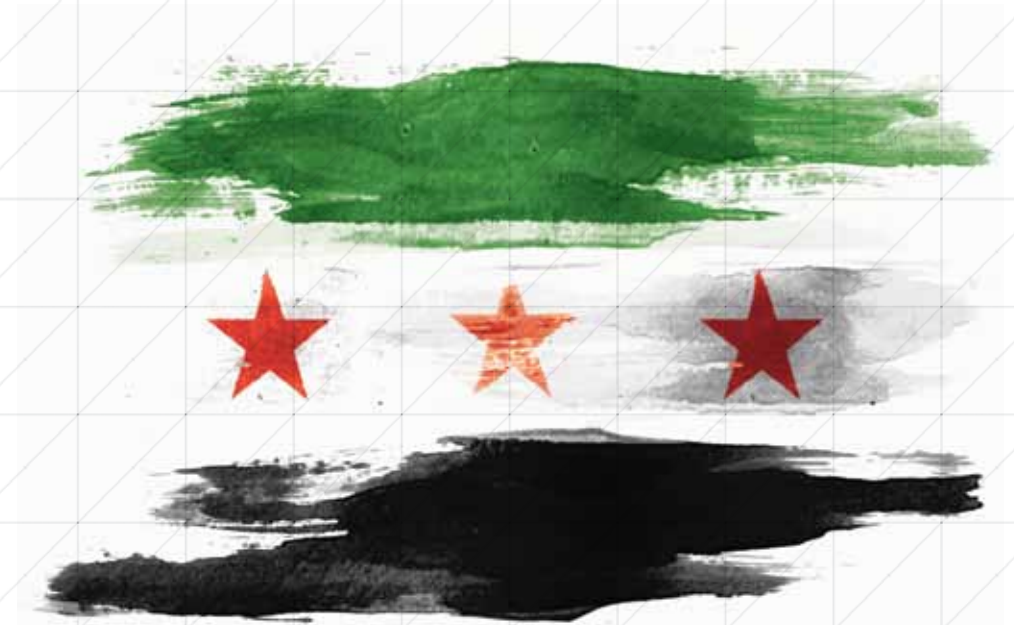
This publication is a research paper in a series of policy papers published by the Arab Network for the Study of Democracy, which seek to document and analyze the political developments in the countries of the Arab Middle East that have witnessed popular uprisings, assessing both their initial causes and the resultant changes and conflicts, four years later.

The Arab Network for the Study of Democracy is a non-governmental organization joining researchers and civil society activists from numerous Arab countries. The Network was founded in 2007 and has held citizen discussion forums and published issue guides to public discussions concerning issues of citizenship, electoral laws, unemployment, and political participation. The Network published an edited volume in 2014 entitled *"The Arab Spring": Revolutions for Deliverance from Authoritarianism*, comprised of case studies of the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, and Syria, as well as of the accompanying changes in Morocco, Algeria, and Jordan, in addition to chapters focusing respectively on the roles of women, young people, and both traditional and new social media in these events. The Network also publishes a newsletter documenting the political, social, and cultural conditions in the region, which can be subscribed to or read via the Network's website: www.ademocracynet.com

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Introduction

From the beginning of 2011, Bashar al-Assad intended to rule out the possibility that the revolutions of change — first initiated in Tunisia, then Egypt, then spreading to other Arab countries — would come to Syria. al-Assad based his calculations on a number of factors, including his survival of the tribulations marking his recent years in power, some of which nearly ended his reign. Most notable among these were the American occupation and its aftermath in Iraq, as well as the evacuation of the Syrian army from Lebanon after the assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri.

But the prevailing winds did not favor the regime. Scattered demonstrations broke out in a number of Syrian cities on 15 March 2011, and a group of children were arrested in Daraa on charges of writing slogans against the regime on the walls of their school. They were tortured and the local authorities refused to release them or respond to the demands of

their parents. Thus demonstrations took place in Daraa on 18 March 2011¹, first calling for reform of the regime, then for its fall after the demonstrations were met with severe repression. Demonstrations spread to other cities and towns across Syria, encompassing wide swaths of the country within months. These demonstrations and gatherings, which peaked during the months of May and June 2011 when hundreds of thousands of citizens came out to participate, were confronted with the extreme violence used by the regime and its affiliated armed militias known as *shabiha*. Tens of thousands of peaceful demonstrators and nonviolent activists were killed, injured, or arrested. As a result of the grave difficulties of continuing to protest without protection, the revolution began to become militarized, gradually transforming with time into an armed struggle, then a military conflict, as the balances of power shifted and different actors became involved.

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The political scene in the spring of 2015

From the beginning of the revolution, the politics of the revolution have been externally focused, with nearly all Syrian parties acting with an eye always trained on foreign powers. This tendency, of shaping policy in terms of its external effectiveness, has only increased with subsequent developments. The regime, in keeping with its long exclusion of the Syrian people from the practice of politics, chose to confront the revolution with violence. This choice was immediately apparent from al-Assad's first speech, which was an explicit declaration of war on the Syrians who rose up². For four long years, al-Assad has never entertained any notion or possible solution other than restoring the country to the way it was. If he cannot rule it, than no one else can have it either, leading to the adoption of a scorched-earth policy. The only opening for "politics" that the regime allowed was to the outside world, so that Syria along with its allies could go through the motions of entertaining the concerns of the international community,

meanwhile buying time for the regime to survive and crush those rising up against it. The regime likewise managed to set the rules of the games and constrain those rebelling by ensnaring them in a cycle of violence, which did not allow the opposition time to catch its breath, let alone allow new political movements to crystallize. The uprising was engulfed in violence, which led to its militarization. This in itself was enough to narrow the range of political possibilities, since the funding that supported militarization came from abroad with conflicting agendas that on the whole supported Islamist groups that tended toward totalitarianism. While this funding came from the region almost in its entirety, it was nevertheless foreign funds driving this process of militarization and Islamization.

As for the opposition bodies that did form, two in particular came to the fore: the Syrian National Council and the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces



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(commonly abbreviated as the Syrian National Coalition). The Syrian National Council was formed first, in October 2011, at a moment when the mood favored a greater role for the international community in the revolution³. The council is composed of Islamist and liberal forces primarily, along with some representatives of Kurdish and Assyrian forces and a few independents, and it sought to obtain official recognition by the international community, to represent the demands of Syrians to the international community, and to prepare for the phase following the fall of the regime. Despite some initial reservations regarding foreign military intervention, which can be seen in the National Council's early resolutions, disagreements over the question of foreign intervention became one of the chief causes of tension among its members. These reservations generally dissipated with the passage of time, and the council began to favor various forms of potential foreign intervention, from safe havens to direct military involvement. Over time — with the continued deterioration of the situation inside Syria, the escalation of the regime's repression, and the gradual process of militarization — the political role of the council and its influence diminished.

In 2013, the formation of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces was announced,⁴ thanks mainly to the efforts of the opposition figure Riad Seif, who announced an ambitious program, which confidently promised to achieve the following points: unify the opposition, support the revolution, organize and support the Free Syrian Army, administer liberated areas, provide relief, and prevent a political vacuum from forming in the wake of the regime's collapse.⁵ This program is what

makes the National Coalition look like an alternative to the National Council, despite the fact that the regional and international supporters of the coalition are the same countries that supported the council, such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, America, Britain, and France. But the coalition subsequently met the same fate that befell the council, and it failed to achieve its promises for a number of reasons, some of which are connected to its internal composition, others to conflicting foreign interests and tensions among the supporting countries.

The militant Islamic groups may possess a political project in the form of imposing "shari'a" law and establishing an "Islamic state" after the overthrow of the regime, but they are seeking to realize this goal through war, not through a political process. These groups present themselves as the already realized representatives of Syria and its future.

As for the National Coordination Body,⁶ which was formed through a meeting of some of the leading personalities and forces of the traditional opposition, it has sought a place among the ranks of the various representatives of the popular movement and the coordinating committees. The group has created a slogan comprised of three no's: "No to authoritarianism, no to sectarianism, no to outside interference." The body presents itself as concerned primarily with the work of the political opposition inside Syria. Here its approach is an implicit critique of the National Council, which has thrown itself into the embrace of the world while distancing itself from Syria. However, this self-image is less than accurate. Despite what the body has managed to do inside Syria, particularly through the group's flexibility from the outset with respect to dialogue with the regime, the

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regime has nevertheless managed to limit its impact and prevent it from playing any role of significance domestically, and has even gone so far as to arrest some of its top members. Perhaps for these reasons, the body has found itself walking the same path trod by the others, which is to practice politics as a form of activism geared toward the outside world, in order to create space for itself in the existing landscape. It was striking, for example, that the Salvation Conference,⁷ which the body called for to be held in Damascus, did not take place until after Russia put pressure on its ally, the regime.

As for the Arab countries that have become actors in Syrian affairs, notably Qatar and Saudi Arabia, they have entered into the fray via the Arab League. In the beginning this meant attempting to resolve the Syrian situation through diplomatic means, while escalating its response commensurate with the regime's violence toward the revolution. Perhaps the first such escalatory step in response to the regime came on 12 November 2011 when the league froze the participation of Syrian delegations in all of the Arab league bodies,⁸ called upon the Arab states to isolate Damascus diplomatically through the withdrawal of ambassadors, and sought to impose economic sanctions on the regime. Then in mid-December 2011, Qatar, which was chairing the Ministerial Committee on Syria Affairs, demanded on behalf of the Arab League that the Syrian issue be internationalized by raising the issue to the United Nations Security Council, which drew a double Russian-Chinese veto.

Turkey, since the beginning of the month of Ramadan in 2011, has pursued its diplomacy in regard to the situation in Syria along two mutually supporting tracks. Above all, Turkey's preferred option was for the Syrian regime to initiate political, constitutional, and economic

reforms, with Bashar al-Assad staying in power. One of the initiatives that Turkey proposed sought to achieve these changes by forming a government in which the Muslim Brotherhood would participate alongside the ruling Ba'ath party, with the opposition to be given one third of the representatives in government. The Syrian regime rejected this proposal. The second tact that Turkey has taken is to put political and economic pressure on the regime, reflected in the facilities given to the Syrian opposition, especially the Islamist opposition represented by the Muslim Brotherhood, on Turkish territory. Near the end of April 2011, the Syrian opposition held the first of its conferences in Istanbul, and its second in Antalya in early June 2011.⁹ At both conferences, the attendees were largely Islamists. Subsequently, Turkey gave free reign to the various formations of the political opposition (including both the National Council and the National Coalition), and to the military opposition (the Free Syrian Army). Turkey coordinated its policies with both Qatar and Saudi Arabia, until a diplomatic rift opened between Saudi Arabia and Turkey (parallel to the rift between Saudi Arabia and Qatar), after Saudi Arabia supported the military coup d'état in Egypt against President Mohamed Morsi, who had come from the ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Within the so-called "Friends of the Syrian People," a number of countries — including major powers like the United States, Britain, and France — lined up against the Syrian regime. The "Friends of Syria" recognized first the National Council, and then later the National Coalition, as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. This did not, however, mean that there was any unity of policy or vision of the various friends

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regarding Syria. None have lived up to their commitments to Syria, and their influence on the course of events has been generally quite weak, and largely negative, especially after the rise of Islamists in Syria.

The regime's allies — specifically Iran and Russia — have been much more loyal by comparison. Iran has not skimped on supplying weapons, expertise, and mobilizing its regional allies in support of the Assad regime. Russia has likewise supplied the regime with arms and advisers, and has acted as a barrier to any moves to isolate the regime in the UN Security Council. Russia has therefore in a way encouraged al-Assad to believe in his ability to resolve things in his favor, through both its continued support and its forestalling of the regime's international isolation.

The Russians and Americans found consensus in pushing for two conferences that were held in Geneva, attended by both the regime and the opposition as represented by the National Coalition, as well as the Arab and other regional countries involved in Syrian affairs. The important exception was Iran, which was excluded at the requests of both the National Coalition and Saudi Arabia as a condition for their participation in the conference. The Geneva Conference failed, owing to the regime's continuous demand to discuss the fight against terrorism first before moving on to other points, while the National Coalition stuck to its demand for first discussing the subject of the transfer of power. In fact, the Geneva option was doomed to failure, though some weary Syrians held out hope. If anything, the conference made things even more complicated, especially since the regime made it seem as if it had been forced into it. If the conference had any effects, these ended with the farcical elections on 3 June 2014,



which crowned Bashar al-Assad president once again with 88 percent of the vote, amidst support from his allies and condemnation from his international opponents. Or perhaps it was the resignation in May 2014 of Lakhdar Brahimi,¹⁰ the joint United Nations and Arab League special envoy to Syria and one of the godparents of the second Geneva Conference, which indicated the end of this tact of attempting to find a negotiated solution.

Recently, in the context of preparing to form an international coalition against jihadists in Syria and Iraq, the Security Council issued two resolutions, 2170 and 2178, regarding the fight against terrorism. The regime treated these actions as if they were a diplomatic victory and as a confirmation of its narrative, which it had propagated since the early days of the protests (casting the protests as nothing more than the work of criminals and terrorists in conspiracy with foreign powers). This point, of framing the revolution as an act of terrorism, had been the regime's special point of emphasis at Geneva 2. The regime marketed itself as a reliable counterpart in this war on terror. The regime, though always strident in defense of its sovereignty, announced that it would explicitly welcome any action directed against terrorism on its territory, under the condition that it be in coordination with the

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regime. The international coalition rejected this proposal, out of concern for the situation on the borders with Israel and Lebanon. The regime anticipated the concern of both Israel and its allies once chaos reached the border, set in 1974 in accordance with the separation of forces and disengagement agreement between Israel and Syria. But some newcomers, like the jihadists of al-Nusra Front, do not recognize these international conventions, which has been reflected in their treatment of the international peacekeeping forces (UNDOF, or United Nations Disengagement Observer Force). al-Nusra Front occupied some of UNDOF's positions and captured some of the peacekeepers, who were later released thanks to the intervention of some of the neighboring Arab countries. Although al-Nusra has not undertaken any military action against Israel to this point, Israel has read al-Nusra's priorities as fighting the regime first, then turning its weapons shortly thereafter toward Israel, which is on the list of al-Qaeda's enemies (and al-Nusra Front represents al-Qaeda in Syria). In addition, Israel has become concerned with recent events in the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula, which adjoins the borders of Israel and Palestine, where groups professing loyalty to the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (known by its Arabic acronym as *Da'ish*) have emerged to carry out attacks against the Egyptian army. From the Sinai, these groups could infiltrate into the Palestinian territories (such as neighboring Gaza) or use the Sinai as a base to attack Israeli targets.

After all this, it seemed as if the era of diplomacy had ended for the foreseeable future, with the departure of Lakhdar Brahimi from the scene. Yet at the beginning of 2015, diplomatic efforts resumed at the hands of his successor, the Italian-Swedish Staffan de

Mistura, who was appointed special envoy to Syria.¹¹ De Mistura's initiative has revolved around what he calls the "frozen zones," the disputed areas between regime forces and the forces of the armed opposition. Each party is supposed to remain in the regions it currently controls and cease military operations, beginning in the Aleppo region. De Mistura believes that success in this experiment will allow the treatment of humanitarian issues in these regions through the introduction of aid, thereby establishing a base that can be built upon to reach a political solution to the Syrian crisis. He is preparing to hold a third Geneva conference (Geneva 3) for the purpose of further consultation and discussion.

Reactions to the de Mistura initiative have varied. The regime, after the envoy's visit to Damascus, pronounced it worthy of consideration. The Syrian foreign minister and his Russian counterpart during their meeting in Russia confirmed that they would welcome the efforts of the international envoy. The opposition has taken various positions, with some responding positively, especially those inclined toward negotiations, while others have seen the initiative (and negotiations generally) as a gateway to recognizing and lending legitimacy to the regime, thereby giving it a chance to gather its military might and direct it toward the areas not covered by the initiative.

While there has been diplomatic movement in the recent period, it is neither clear how far this will go nor what the content of any such agreements will look like. It seems that Russia is making its presence felt, recently receiving in Moscow various delegations from the regime and the opposition, as well as from the heavyweight states involved in Syrian affairs, such as Saudi Arabia. Washington, for

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its part, has taken on the role of dealing with Iran, the foremost ally of the Syrian regime. During a meeting between the two sides in Muscat, the capital of Oman, both parties emphasized the need to use political means to address the situation in Syria, without specifying the mechanisms by which the two countries could discuss it. Then, there were reports that all of this would be deferred until after the completion of a deal on Iran's nuclear program, which is considered the top priority.

Militarization and the evolution of the military scene

The peaceful demonstrations of May, June, and July 2011 drove the Syrian regime to deploy the military to confront and crush the movement, once it seemed that the security services and loyal civilian militias (known as *shabiha*) were unable to take control by themselves in the face of the continuously expanding and escalating protest movement. This step by the regime may have also been calculated to drive the people into taking up arms, thereby stripping the revolution of its nonviolence, which had become a thorn in the side of the regime. Likewise, armed opposition gave the regime carte blanche to use every means of extreme brutality and violence to suppress the revolution. However, this step also led to the defection of numerous officers and others in the military who refused to kill the protesters. The first attempt to frame these defections publicly came when Lieutenant Colonel Hussein Harmoush was able to reach Turkey, where he announced the organization of a "Free Officers Movement,"¹² which defined its objects as defending the people, defending the peacefulness of the revolution, and defending against the regime's forces. On 29 July 2011, Colonel Riad al-Asaad announced

the formation of the "Free Army,"¹³ which incorporated the Free Officers Movement after the regime succeeded in kidnapping its leader Hussein Harmoush from Turkish territory.

The newly founded Free Syrian Army (or FSA) thus came to the fore of the opposition. This occurred in conjunction with the mood shifting in favor of militarization within the revolutionary movement, especially after the regime chose almost exclusively to use violence in dealing with the Syrian protesters, who were killed, arrested, and tortured. Demonstrating in many cities became difficult if not impossible, as previously mentioned. This happened in no small part because the FSA claimed to represent all of the groups formed outside Syria to fight the regime, even welcoming groups with Islamist tendencies, such as the Suqour al-Sham (Falcons of Greater Syria) Brigade, which was formed in November 2011.

The first group to appear on the scene that rejected the goals set by the FSA and the nonviolent protest movement — such as establishing a secular democratic state — was al-Nusra (Victory) Front, which announced itself on 25 January 2012,¹⁴ ten months after the start of the revolution. The group stated that its goal was to establish an Islamic state applying shari'a or Islamic religious law. al-Nusra Front's star rose subsequently thanks to its effective military operations against the regime, which were distinguished by the front's use of tactics such as suicide bombings, inherited from jihadist organizations like al-Qaeda. al-Nusra marked the beginning of the rise of armed Islamist groups, at the expense of the FSA, and with a drastically different set of strategies and objectives. A number of factors contributed to the rise of these groups and the decline of the FSA: the FSA was essentially an umbrella for a wide array

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of combat forces, which were neither under its command nor acting in coordination with other factions. Another crucial factor was the role of funding from Islamist sources, which required the factions they supported to abide by Islamic religious standards, which meant appropriately Islamist battalion names or logos, or mandated growing and wearing long beards, and so forth. A third was the impact of sectarianism: most minorities, at the forefront the majority of Alawites (coreligionists with Bashar al-Assad), lined up in support of the regime. Furthermore, the entrance of Shiite militias like Hezbollah or others coming from Iraq, as well as military and political support from Iran for the Syrian regime, played a role in strengthening jihadist propaganda. The jihadists presented and continue to present themselves as representing and defending Sunni Islam.

Islamist groups proliferated in Syrian territory, with some of their leaders becoming significant local players, such as al-Tawhid (Unity) Brigade in Aleppo, or Ahrar ash-Sham (Free Men of Greater Syria) and Suqour al-Sham in Idlib. The growth and transformation of the Sariyyat al-Islam (Company of Islam) in Douma is especially notable, as it evolved into Liwa al-Islam (Brigade of Islam), then Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam) after dozens of other Islamist brigades joined its ranks.

On 9 April 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed emir of the Islamic State of Iraq, announced that al-Nusra Front would join his “state,” thereby stretching its boundaries into Syria. al-Baghdadi anointed the union as the “Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (or Greater Syria),” abbreviated in Arabic as *Da’ish*.¹⁵ However, Abu Mohammad al-Julani, the emir of al-Nusra, rejected al-Baghdadi’s decision, and instead pledged allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri, the emir of al-Qaeda.¹⁶ This was the first sign of disagreement among the jihadists in Syria, a rift that would later develop into a fierce war.

Currently, there are three extremist forces that appear strongest militarily in Syria: the regime, Da’ish, and al-Nusra. After these three would come the Islamic Front, which has suffered losses at the hands of the regime in the suburbs and countryside surrounding Damascus, though it remains more prominent than Da’ish in Ar-Raqqah and Deir ez-Zor. The Islamic Front also suffered severe blows to its leadership, with the losses of Abu Khalid al-Souri (one of the leaders of Ahrar al-Sham) and Abdul Qadir Saleh (commander of al-Tawhid Brigade). More recently, dozens of the top leaders of Ahrar al-Sham, foremost the commander Hassan Aboud, were assassinated collectively by a suicide bomber during a leadership meeting. The Islamic Front is distributed throughout different parts of Syria, but its presence remains strongest in the countryside and suburbs surrounding Damascus (Rif Dimashq Governorate), especially in Eastern Ghouta, and likewise in the countryside surrounding Aleppo and the countryside of Idlib. The FSA still holds important positions in the south of the country, as well as in some of the towns of rural Idlib.

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Regarding the military position of the regime: a number of factors from the beginning of the revolution’s militarization indicated the regime’s weakness militarily, which reinforced the conviction that the path of militarization would be the surest and fastest way of bringing down the regime. One of these phenomena was the increasing number of defections by members of the military, officers and enlisted men alike, as well as the regime’s loss of control of vast areas (more than half of the country), especially in the countryside. Perhaps aware of the impossibility of waging war throughout the entirety of Syria, the regime focused on holding and barricading itself in the governorate capitals and other major cities. The only governorate capital that completely left the regime’s control was Ar-Raqqah, until March 2015 when the regime lost control over Idlib, which became the second. The areas that the regime mostly controls are the Syrian coast and the As-Suwayda governorate in the south. The regime has also focused on holding some of the border crossings with Lebanon, after losing all of the crossings with Jordan. Facing offensives on multiple fronts from the various opposition military groups, the regime could not engage all of them by itself, despite its air superiority and general firepower superiority. The regime has used ballistic missiles, explosive barrels, and even chemical weapons such as chlorine gas, which have killed hundreds of civilians and injured thousands of others. As a result of this situation, external allies have played a substantial role in supporting the regime militarily, by donating extensive expertise, materiel, and fighters. These contributions from external allies have reinforced the regime’s forces in some areas, and even permitted the regime’s forces to go on the offensive and achieve some military victories

(especially in the countryside of Damascus, Homs, and the northern countryside of Hama).

On the other hand, the regime has taken some serious blows in fighting against the FSA and some of the Islamist battalions in Daraa Governorate, against al-Nusra Front and Ahrar ash-Sham and their allies in the Idlib Governorate, and against Da’ish at Ar-Raqqah airport and military base as well as the gas fields in the countryside of Homs.

In Hama, battles have raged in the northern countryside, and opposition militants have managed to get close to the Hama airport and threaten the city itself; however, the regime forces, thanks to military air support (which has played a crucial role on many fronts), succeeded in recovering most of the areas that had been lost.

In Aleppo, regime forces made progress in the fall of 2014 in an attempt to lay siege to the city, but opposition forces, which restructured themselves under the name of *al-Jabha al-Shamiyya* (Levant Front),¹⁷ counterattacked and retook the strategic areas that had been lost. Talk circulates today about the possibility of forming a new military front joining the largest factions in order to carry out a sweeping attack on regime-controlled areas.

At the same time, hit-and-run attacks and skirmishes continue between al-Nusra accompanied by smaller Islamist factions and regime forces backed by Hezbollah in Qalamoun without any progress for either side, since neither has the capacity to resolve the situation decisively.

Da’ish suffered painful defeats in both rural Aleppo and Idlib at the hands of armed opposition factions at the beginning of 2014. Da’ish therefore focused on Ar-Raqqah and Deir ez-Zor, expelling other opposition factions from these areas and striking back at the

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clans that had been fighting against it, such as al-Shaitat, which has suffered a number of atrocities at the hands of Da'ish. On 29 June 2014, Da'ish announced the establishment of the State of the Islamic Caliphate and the investiture of al-Baghdadi as the caliph. The organization now controls vast areas, especially after seizing a number of important Iraqi cities and quantities of Iraqi military materiel as well as funds and property belonging to the Iraqi state. These windfalls, in addition to selling oil, have allowed the organization to spread its troops throughout both Iraq and Syria. In Syria, Da'ish has attempted to liquidate the regime's presence in the city of Deir ez-Zor, where Da'ish besieged the airport and other places guarded by regime forces. The organization likewise attempted to advance westward toward the opposition-controlled city of Aleppo and toward the countryside east of Homs, in order to control the gas wells there and threaten the city proper, as well as move east toward the towns of al-Hasakah and al-Qamishli (controlled by the regime and Kurdish militias). The organization is therefore present in the countryside east of Aleppo and on the outskirts of the city proper through its control of the city of al-Bab, as well as in the northern countryside of Aleppo, particularly in the cities of Manbij and Jarabulus. In the north, the organization has launched an attack on the Kurdish areas, seeking to take control of most of the villages around the city of Kobani/Ayn al-Arab as well as part of the city itself. These developments resonated around the world, especially in connection with a series of atrocities perpetrated by Da'ish: the expulsion of the Christians of Mosul, the catastrophe that befell the Yazidis in Iraq, and the executions of American journalists. Da'ish thus not only threatened American interests in the region

but also threatened further massacres and atrocities by looking to invade the Kurdish areas of Iraq and Syria. All of this and more led to the announcement of an international coalition against Da'ish, led by the United States and other countries that had previously made a point of declaring their opposition to the Assad regime. This new alliance, however, declared that opposing the regime would not be a priority. Many in the Syrian opposition and among the multinational allies of the United States considered this step to be in the interest of the Assad regime, despite the international coalition's explicit rejection of cooperation with the regime. One of the implications of the formation of this international coalition and its professed priorities is the newfound tension between the two allies of Turkey and the United States. The US rejected all of Ankara's conditions for participating in military operations, while simultaneously pressuring Turkey to make concessions. One of Turkey's demands was to establish safe havens and a no-fly zone in northern Syria along the Turkish border, but this demand could not overcome several obstacles, which included a lack of American interest.

The international coalition led by Washington has limited its intervention thus far to air strikes. Although these strikes have dealt painful blows to Da'ish, airpower alone is incapable of resolving the battle or decisively shifting the balance of power. This is made abundantly clear by the fact that Da'ish can still move and attack throughout Iraq and Syria. It also seems that the alliance was not in a hurry to finish what it started. From the outset, there were statements by American officials suggesting that the battle with Da'ish could drag on for years,¹⁸ and that efforts to train 5,000 members of the opposition in Turkey and

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Saudi Arabia to confront Da'ish (and al-Nusra) would need a considerable amount of time to succeed. Even when completed, the practical impact of this training would be rather limited, considering the modest numbers involved.

All of this means that there is no immediate military solution to the Syrian crisis, despite the setbacks dealt to the regime and its war machine, meaning the crisis will likely only deepen.

The humanitarian scene

The humanitarian crisis in Syria is multifaceted. Perhaps the foremost facet since the start of the revolution and continuing even now has been the massive toll in terms of human life — the numbers of killed, missing, or arrested. Statistics go as high as 250,000 Syrians killed at the hands of the regime, with a similar number of detained and of missing. It should be noted that the highest percentage of those killed by the regime and its allies are civilians, and the proportion of women and children among the dead are not insignificant. While there are no precise statistics regarding the number of people killed by the regime, a conservative estimate is 100,000 killed by the soldiers, officers, militia members of the National Defence Forces, and regime-allied thugs (*shabiha*).

With the start of the process of militarization, the tragedy took on another dimension: displacement and deportation. Estimates of the numbers of internally displaced Syrians exceed eight million, most of whom have been forced to leave their homes and flee to other areas inside Syria, whereas the number of people displaced to neighboring countries is estimated to be around four million. The majority of the displaced are from areas outside the control of the regime, but these are areas that the



regime has shelled or fought battles over or in which there are no longer the basic, vital resources necessary to sustain bare life. Among the displaced are the wealthy who have fled and reinvested their money in safer areas, with many heading toward the Syrian coast, which is considered one of the strongholds of the regime and therefore a sanctuary for its supporters. The Syrian coast has occupied center stage in receiving displaced persons from various Syrian cities, especially Aleppo.¹⁹ Estimates of the displaced are around two million, dispersed to shelters allocated by the regime or to rented apartments. While most live on some form of public or private aid, some have managed to carve out economic niches there. As for those displaced outside the country, most are found dispersed among the neighboring countries of Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, and Iraq, with most staying but some moving on from these countries to Egypt or Algeria. A considerable number have managed to enter European countries, either through governmental programs accommodating set quotas of displaced Syrians, or through illegal channels, which has resulted in some hundreds of Syrian deaths by drowning in the Mediterranean.

Lebanon leads all of the countries receiving Syrians, with estimates of up to a million and a half Syrians taking refuge there so far. Turkey comes in second, with 1,200,000. The number of Syrian refugees in Jordan exceeds half a

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million. Iraq has received the least among the neighboring countries, approximately 250,000, a large number of whom are Kurds seeking to reach Iraqi Kurdistan. After the latest Da'ish attack on the Kurdish regions in the north of Syria, tens of thousands of Kurds fled to Turkey in order to escape persecution.

Most of these displaced persons live in miserable conditions, especially in the camps. Without work, most depend on aid that barely provides them with their most basic needs, leaving them on the edge of survival.

The situation is miserable for Syrians inside Syrian territory as well, with some under siege and stuck in areas without the resources to survive. Some of the areas besieged by regime forces and therefore suffering incredible hardships include the Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk, al-Wa'ar neighborhood in Homs, and the areas south of Damascus as well as Eastern Ghouta. Some international organizations have attempted to reach some of these locations, but they have

run into several obstacles, including the Syrian regime's obstruction of aid to these areas. International organizations are forced to coordinate with the regime so that the Syrian government does not impede its activities in other parts of Syria. These efforts are also hindered by insecurity, as mercenaries or armed extremists control some of the roads in these areas. In addition to the above, the scale of the problem and therefore the amount of aid required is enormous. Nearly three million Syrians are estimated to be unemployed and without any source of income. Unemployment affects not only the life of the one out of work, but also their families, who subsist on this income. Therefore the total number impacted by unemployment, including dependent family members, is almost 10 million. This problem of a lack of income has been compounded by the extremely high cost of basic goods, which reflects in part the impact of wartime conditions on the economy. But another factor has been the emergence of a class of warlord profiteers who traffic in everything from weapons and commodities to people.

The health conditions are also tragic in Syria,²⁰ as a result of the regime's bombing and shelling of many of the health centers throughout the country, as well as a dearth of personnel, equipment, and medicine.

Education is likewise in a deplorable state. In addition to depriving hundreds of thousands of students of education, especially among the displaced and in the areas outside the regime's control, the educational infrastructure inside Syria has suffered catastrophic losses. Many schools have been destroyed in whole or in part because of bombing or shelling, while many other schools have been converted into shelters for those displaced from their homes.

Syria

Rights and liberties

Rights have clearly become more restricted across Syria. The regime has imposed restrictions on the people under its rule, and detention has become a commonplace to which no one is immune. The estimated number of detainees in the regime's prisons is 250,000, a large portion of whom live in appalling conditions, subjected to torture and starvation, leading to the deaths of thousands. The same applies to Da'ish, which has detained a few thousands in its prisons in Deir ez-Zor, Ar-Raqqa, and the eastern countryside of Aleppo, and has executed some of its opponents in public squares. The areas falling under the control of the Islamists face the additional threat to their freedoms of Islamist governing bodies, which replace the courts and seek to interfere in the most mundane details of daily life, under the pretext of the application of "Islamic law."

There is also the issue of civilian kidnappings, which have reached a terrifying level as insecurity abounds. The motives behind these kidnappings vary. Some are linked to wartime circumstances, particularly the form of kidnapping for profit, as a type of mercenary activity. Although the regime and its militias may hold the edge over others in this arena, some opposition factions, especially the Islamists, have taken to conducting kidnappings of their own. Four civilian activists — Samira Khalil, Razan Zaitouneh, her husband Wael Hamada, and Nazem Hammadi — were abducted in the city of Douma, controlled by the Islamic Front. Their opposition to the regime, since long before the start of the revolution, was to no avail.²¹ There are also kidnappings on a sectarian basis, as happened in Homs during the first months of

the revolution, when Islamist factions stormed Alawite villages in the northern countryside of Latakia and abducted women and children.²²

Syria is therefore a humanitarian catastrophe, a disaster that will take years to be resolved, even after the conflict ends and a political solution is reached. ▲

1- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1KqyOumA750>

2- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S89q-tVZp0o>

3- <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis?fa=48334>

4- <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis?fa=50628>

5- <http://bit.ly/1H5fppp>

I have previously discussed this initiative in an editorial for *al-Jumhuriya* (The Republic for the Study of the Syrian Revolution), which can be found at the following link in Arabic: <http://aljumhuriya.net/301>

6- <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis?fa=48369>

7- <http://bit.ly/1HNrYlg>

8- <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/11/12/176659.html>

9- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U5ObBUON-OQ>

10- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbzhsXFURVQ>

11- <http://bit.ly/1dPIw4X>

12- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3gHP2p3W9gg>

13- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItzI_AIFUWg

14- <https://archive.org/details/Nasra>

15- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-0uMWWMxIk>

16- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=USkf0fa9Vm8>

17- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9LXKK77JF74>

18- <http://bit.ly/1G9A0s0>

19- See the study in Arabic by Sadiq Abdul Rahman: <http://aljumhuriya.net/28476>

20- <http://bit.ly/1M8mJA5>

21- <http://hunastak.com/article/1611>

22- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TXGAzAL24Q4>