

# United Nations Security Council

**Agenda:** The Syrian Civil War

**Freeze Date:** 21st August, 2013



# Letter from the Executive Board

Greetings Delegates,

We welcome you to the United Nations Security Council, the action taking body of the United Nations.

Step into the world of the Syrian Civil War and go back to 2013 through the eyes of different countries.

This background guide has been formulated in order to give you an insight to the agenda for the council. This guide should just act as a head start to your research, and you're recommended to not to limit your research to this guide.

Feel free to contact us in case there are any further queries.

Prepare well. We wish you the best of luck!

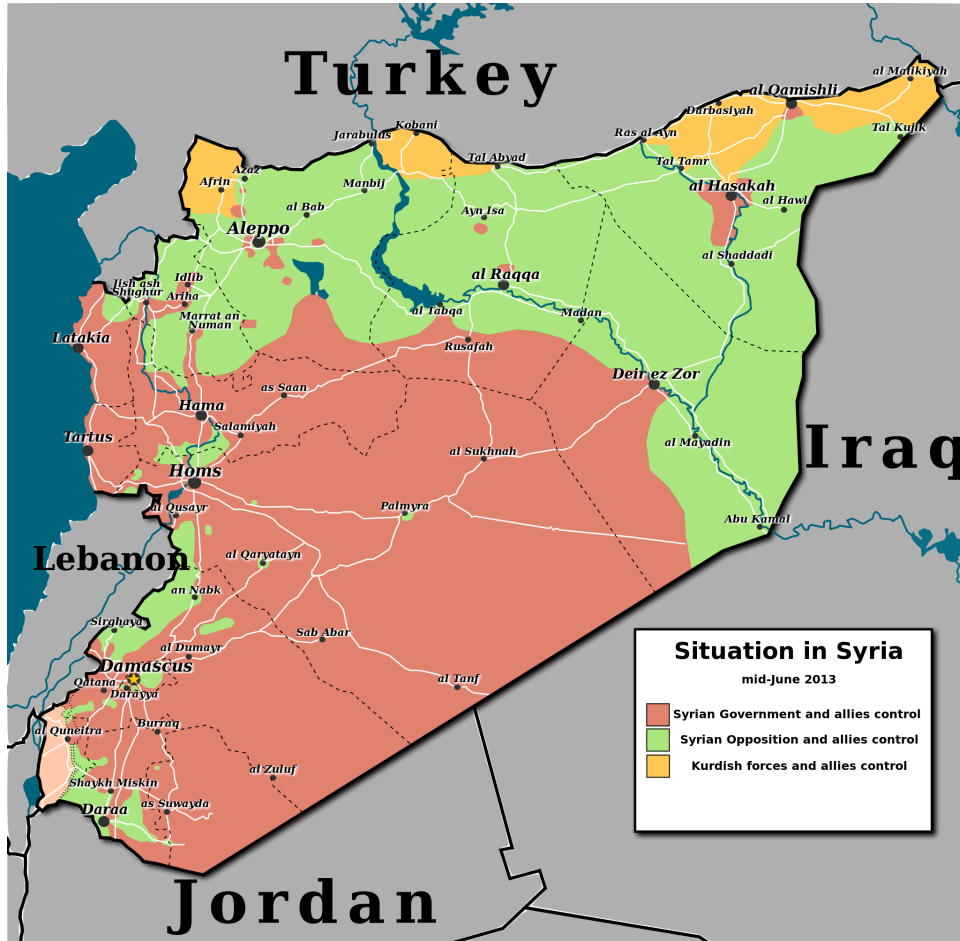
Regards,

Executive Board of the United Nations Security Council.

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# Introduction



## Syria:

Syria is a middle-eastern country bordered by Turkey in the north, Iraq to the east, Jordan to the south, Israel to the southwest, and Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea to the left. Syria and Lebanon are bordered by the Anti-Lebanon Mountains.

## **Pre-war Political Situation**

Syria has always been in a very politically unstable situation, marked by several coups and leaders getting overthrown. The 1963 coup led by the Military Committee of the Ba'ath Party marked the long-term Ba'ath rule in Syria. The radical faction organized the coup of 1966, which led to more extreme socialist policies in Syria. The 1970 coup, also known as the "Corrective Movement" established a long-lasting authoritarian regime of Hafez al-Assad, which was continued by his son Bashar al-Assad after his death.

## **Events leading up to the war**

### **Tunisian Revolution:**

President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was overthrown by large-scale protests that followed Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in December 2010, which marked the start of the Arab Spring in Tunisia. Protests demanding political reforms, increased freedoms, and an end to oppression and corruption erupted throughout the Arab world, sparked by Tunisia. These countries included Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain.

### **Initial Protests in Syria:**

In February 2011, Syria held small protests to show solidarity with other Arab Spring movements. These initial protests were quickly put down by security forces.

In March 2011, a group of teenagers in Daraa were arrested and tortured for painting anti-government graffiti in response to the Arab Spring movement. Their brutal treatment sparked local outrage. Security

forces opened fire on protesters in Daraa, killing several people. The harsh response fueled anger and sparked larger protests. Protests continue to escalate. In April 2011, nationwide protests spread to cities such as Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo. Protesters demanded democratic reforms.

In June 2011, the government increased its crackdown by using live ammunition, mass arrests, and torture. Notable events include the siege of Daraa and the deaths of dozens of protesters in various cities. In July 2011, Syrian military defectors formed the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to protect protesters and fight the Assad regime. This marked the start of the armed resistance. The conflict became sectarian, with the Sunni opposition targeting the Alawite government and its supporters.

### **Key incidents and turning points:**

In August 2011, security forces carried out a massive assault on Hama, resulting in hundreds of deaths. This further galvanized the opposition and increased international condemnation of the Assad regime. In October 2011, the United Nations condemned the violence and urged an end to the crackdown. The United States and the European Union imposed sanctions against key figures in the Assad government. In November 2011, the Arab League suspended Syria's membership due to continued violence against civilians. This was a major diplomatic blow to the Assad regime. In February 2012, the Syrian military launched an offensive against Homs, an opposition stronghold. The month-long siege resulted in numerous casualties and extensive destruction.

## **Increased militarization and international involvement:**

Countries like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar started providing support to certain rebel groups. The U.S. and European countries also offered non-lethal assistance. In July 2012, Syria's largest city, Aleppo, saw one of the longest and most intense battles of the war. The city became a major battleground for government forces and rebels.

The Ghouta chemical attacks, which took place on **August 21, 2013**, were one of the deadliest chemical weapons attacks in the Syrian Civil War. The incident occurred in the Ghouta suburbs of Damascus, Syria, and involved the use of the nerve agent sarin.

## **Freeze Date:**

### **Location and Timing:**

The attacks took place in the early hours of August 21, 2013, in the Eastern and Western Ghouta regions, controlled by various opposition groups fighting against the Syrian government.

### **Nature of the Attack:**

Multiple rockets filled with sarin gas were launched into densely populated civilian areas. Symptoms of sarin exposure include convulsions, respiratory distress, and foaming at the mouth. Victims experienced these symptoms rapidly after exposure.

### **Casualties**

Estimates of the death toll vary, but reports suggest that over 1,400 people, including many women and children, were killed in the attacks. Thousands more were injured and suffered long-term health consequences due to the exposure to the nerve agent.

# **Causes of the Syrian Civil War:**

## **1. Authoritarian Rule.**

Hafiz al-Assad's 30-year military rule witnessed the transformation of Syria into a dynastic dictatorship. The new political system was led by the Ba'ath party elites dominated by the Alawites, who were fervently loyal to the Assad family and controlled the military, security forces and secret police. After the death of Hafiz al-Assad on 10 June 2000, the Constitution of Syria was amended. The minimum age requirement for the presidency was lowered from 40 to 34, which was Bashar's age at the time. Assad contested as the only candidate and was confirmed president on 10th July, 2000. In line with his role as President of Syria, he was also appointed the commander-in-chief of the Syrian Armed Forces and Regional Secretary of the Ba'ath Party.

The Baathist government ruled Syria as a totalitarian state and controlled every aspect of Syrian society for decades. Composed of the Syrian Arab Army, secret police and militia Baathists, the commanders of the government's security forces directly carry out the executive functions of the state, with little regard for legal processes and bureaucracy. Security services shut down civil society organizations, restrict freedom of movement within the country, and ban non-Baath political literature and symbols. In 2010, Human Rights Watch published a report, "The Wasted Decade," documenting repression during the first decade of Assad's emergency rule; arbitrary arrests, censorship and discrimination against Syrian Kurds.

## **2. Economic Hardship:**



Under al-Assad, the government debt-to-GDP ratio fell from 152.09% in 2000 to 30.02% in 2010. Before the civil war, Syria sought to alleviate its heavy external debt burden through bilateral restructuring agreements with virtually all of its major creditors in Europe, including Germany, France, and Russia. In December 2004, Syria and Poland reached an agreement whereby Syria would pay \$27 million of the total debt of \$261.7 million. In January 2005, Russia and Syria signed an agreement canceling nearly 75% of Syria's debt to Russia, or approximately \$13 billion. Through the agreement, Syria owed Moscow less than 3 billion euros (a little more than 3.6 billion dollars). Half of it will be repaid over the next 10 years, while the rest will be deposited into Russian accounts in Syrian banks and could be used for Russian investment projects in Syria and the purchase of Syrian products. Later that year, Syria reached an agreement with Slovakia and the Czech Republic to pay off an estimated \$1.6 billion in debt for a one-time payment of \$150 million.

By 2013, the Syrian economy faced serious difficulties characterized by structural weaknesses, political instability and external pressures. The economy was highly dependent on oil exports, which accounted for a significant portion of the government's income. However, the decline in oil production and oil reserves had strained the country's financial capacity. In addition, the agricultural sector, another critical part of the economy, suffered from prolonged droughts between 2006 and 2011, which caused widespread crop failures and rural poverty. These environmental problems were exacerbated by inefficient water management and agricultural policies, which further reduced productivity.

The socio-economic landscape was characterized by high unemployment rates, especially among the youth, which fueled widespread discontent. Economic reforms implemented by the

government to liberalize the economy often favored the rich and well-to-do, increasing income inequality and displacing large parts of the population. In addition, the global financial crisis of 2008 affected Syria, reducing Syrian remittances abroad and foreign direct investment.

### **3. Sectarian Tensions:**

**Sunni-Shia Divide:** By 2013, Syria's sectarian tensions were deeply rooted in the country's complex religious and ethnic mosaic. The Sunni Muslim majority, about 74 percent of the population, dominated the Alawite minority, a branch of Shia Islam to which the Assad family belonged. The Alawites, who make up about 12 percent of the population, have long felt marginalized and sought to consolidate power to protect their interests. The Assad regime relied heavily on Alawite loyalty in the military and security services.

This power imbalance had fueled resentment among the Sunni majority, exacerbated by economic disparities and a preference for footnotes in government and military appointments. The government's harsh crackdown on dissent, especially the brutal crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood by Hamas in 1982 that resulted in tens of thousands of deaths, further deepened the divide.

Other religious and ethnic minorities lived precarious lives and often sided with the government, fearing Sunni supremacy and possible persecution. The Kurdish population, approximately 10 percent of the total population, faced systematic discrimination and suppression of cultural rights. Christians, about 10 percent of the population, have enjoyed relative protection under the Assad government as a secular bulwark against Islamic extremism.

As the Arab Spring spread across the Middle East in 2011, Syria's first anti-government protests demanding political reforms and greater freedoms quickly took on a sectarian dimension. The government's

violent response to peaceful protests and the subsequent militarization of the rebellion further polarized society, and sectarian identity became a rallying point for both the government and the opposition. By 2013, the conflict had evolved into a brutal civil war, increasingly characterized by sectarian rhetoric and brutality on both sides, setting the stage for the deep and protracted conflict that followed.

#### **4. Regional and International Influence:**

Syria's impact in the region and on the global stage has been influenced by its strategic position, political partnerships, and participation in local disputes. Syria, being a major player in the Middle East, had a complicated web of alliances and rivalries that had a significant impact on its power. On a local level, Syria held significance within the Arab League and maintained close relationships with Iran. The alliance was enhanced by a common disapproval of Israel and shared strategic objectives. That partnership enabled Syria to wield significant control in Lebanon, primarily through backing the influential Shiite paramilitary and political organization Hezbollah.

During the Cold War, Syria had a connection with Russia on a global level, supplying military and economic aid. The relationship played a vital role in Syria's defense capability and geopolitical position. The West also had strained relations with the Syrian government under President Bashar al-Assad. Initially, efforts were made to establish diplomatic ties with Western countries, but Syria's backing of militant organizations and its human rights violations frequently hindered these endeavors. Furthermore, Syria's opposition to Israel and backing of Palestinian organizations has established Syria as a key player in the broader Arab-Israeli dispute, impacting local relations and connecting Syria with diverse groups in Palestinian lands.

## **5. Repression of Protests:**

The crackdown on protests in Syria prior to 2013 was marked by an increase in violence and brutal repression by the government of President Bashar al-Assad. The unrest began in March 2011 and was influenced by the wider Arab Spring movements in the Middle East. Initially, the demonstrations were largely peaceful, with Syrians demanding political reforms, greater freedoms and the release of political prisoners. However, the government's reaction was swift and harsh. Security forces used lethal force against the protesters, using live ammunition, tear gas and mass arrests to disperse the crowd. Violence quickly escalated, with reports of widespread torture, arbitrary arrests and the use of snipers on unarmed civilians.

The city of Daraa became the epicenter of the uprising, with a particularly severe crackdown after children were arrested for anti-regime graffiti. This brutality only fueled more protests that spread across the country. By the end of 2011, a government crackdown turned the initially peaceful protests into an armed rebellion, with army defectors forming the Free Syrian Army. International condemnation grew, but the Assad regime continued to use extreme measures to suppress dissent, leading to a full-scale civil war. The period before 2013 therefore set the stage for a long and destructive conflict that would engulf Syria in the following years.

Human rights organizations document thousands of deaths and widespread violations of human rights during this period. The government's repressive tactics, which included indiscriminate bombing of residential areas and attacks on medical facilities and personnel, were aimed at crushing dissent and intimidating the population. The brutality of the crackdown led to an increasing militarization of the opposition, with defectors from the Syrian army forming the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other armed groups, setting the stage for a long and

destructive civil war. The actions of the Syrian government were largely condemned by the international community, but there were no effective measures to end the violence and bring perpetrators to justice, leading to a humanitarian crisis that continues to affect the region.

## **Beginning of the War**

### **Pre-War Conditions**

The Assad government's policies included harsh measures against political opposition and dissent. Political parties other than the ruling Ba'ath Party were banned, and the security apparatus closely monitored and often harshly suppressed any form of political opposition. The secret police (Mukhabarat) were notorious for their brutal tactics. Moreover, economic liberalization measures introduced in the early 2000s failed to address the needs of the broader population, often benefiting only a small elite, leading to increased socio-economic disparity.

### **Initial Protests**

The conflict's spark was ignited in the southern city of Daraa. In March 2011, a group of teenagers, inspired by the Arab Spring movements in neighboring countries, painted revolutionary slogans on their school walls. Their subsequent arrest and torture by security forces triggered widespread outrage and protests. The initial demonstrations in Daraa called for democratic reforms, the release of political prisoners, and an end to corruption. The government's harsh response, which

included the use of live ammunition against demonstrators, only fueled the unrest. Funerals for those killed in the protests often turned into large-scale demonstrations, further escalating tensions. Protests quickly spread to other parts of Syria, including major cities such as Damascus, Homs, and Aleppo.

The government's brutal crackdown included deploying tanks and snipers against protesters, leading to numerous casualties. Reports of arbitrary detentions, torture, and disappearances became commonplace. The regime's refusal to engage in meaningful dialogue with protesters and its reliance on violent repression intensified public anger and led to the militarization of the opposition.

## **Escalation to Armed Conflict**

By mid-2011, the government's violent crackdown had led to increasing numbers of defections from the military, with soldiers refusing to fire on unarmed civilians. These defectors formed the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in July 2011, marking the beginning of organized armed resistance against the Assad regime. The FSA sought to unify various opposition groups and coordinate efforts to overthrow the government.

As clashes between government forces and opposition fighters intensified, the conflict evolved from a popular uprising into a full-blown civil war. The opposition quickly fragmented into numerous factions, including secular groups, Islamist militants, and Kurdish forces, each with its own goals and ideologies.

The opposition also received varying degrees of support from regional and international actors. Some Gulf States provided funding and arms to rebel groups, while Turkey allowed its territory to be used as

a safe haven for opposition forces. This external support, however, also contributed to the fragmentation of the opposition, as different backers supported different factions.

## **Major Events and Phases of the War**

### **Phase 1: Uprising and Early Conflict (2011-2012)**

The initial protests in Daraa began with calls for political reform and were met with violent repression by government forces. This sparked nationwide demonstrations. The brutal crackdown on Daraa, including the killing of dozens of protesters, turned the city into a symbol of resistance.

Major cities like Hama and Homs became epicenters of anti-government activity. The government responded with severe crackdowns, leading to significant casualties and escalating the conflict. Homs, in particular, saw some of the fiercest fighting and was often referred to as the "capital of the revolution."

Defected soldiers and officers formed the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in July 2011, signaling the transition from peaceful protests to armed resistance. This marked the start of organized military opposition against the Assad regime. The FSA quickly became a significant force, engaging in battles with government troops and taking control of various territories.

### **Phase 2: Full-Scale Civil War (2012-2013):**

Aleppo, Syria's largest city, became a major battleground. The city was divided between government-controlled western districts and rebel-held eastern districts. The battle for Aleppo was one of the longest

and most destructive of the war, with widespread devastation and high civilian casualties. The prolonged fighting caused severe humanitarian crises, with shortages of food, water, and medical supplies.

Homs faced intense fighting and prolonged sieges. The government aimed to recapture rebel-held areas through a combination of military force and blockades. This led to significant humanitarian crises, with thousands of civilians trapped without access to essential supplies. The siege tactics included cutting off food, water, and medical supplies, leading to severe suffering among the civilian population.

## **Major countries involved**

Syria has mixed relations with its neighbors. Syria had significant influence over Lebanon, maintaining a military presence there until 2005. After the 2005 assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafik Hariri, the relations were complicated as Syria was suspected to have involvement.

### **USA:**

Syria and the US had diplomatic relations after Syria's independence was established, but Syria's alliance with the Soviet Union and conflict with Israel caused friction.

The U.S. initially responded to the peaceful protests in Syria with diplomatic condemnation of the Assad regime's violent crackdown on protesters. As the conflict escalated and the death toll increased, the US accused Syria of human rights abuses and started providing non-lethal aid to the Syrian opposition groups. The US suspected the usage of chemical weapons in Syria.



## **Russia:**

Russia expressed its concerns about the situation and advocated for a political solution, opposing international intervention when the peaceful protests began.

Russia vetoed a UN Security Council resolution condemning the Assad regime's crackdown on protesters and Russia supported a UN Security Council resolution for a ceasefire, while continuing to back Assad diplomatically.

Russia starts supplying arms and military equipment to Syria, including advanced weaponry.

In 2013, Russia continued to provide military assistance to the Assad regime and supported diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict and announced that it would deliver advanced anti-aircraft missiles to Syria. This concerned the Western nations

## **Saudi Arabia:**

Saudi Arabia condemned the Assad regime's violent crackdown on peaceful protesters and called for democratic reforms in Syria and later began providing financial support and non-lethal aid to various opposition groups fighting against the Assad regime. This included funding for humanitarian relief and supplies for rebel forces. Saudi Arabia worked with other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Western allies to coordinate support for the Syrian opposition. In 2013, Saudi Arabia increased its support to the Syrian opposition by providing more substantial military aid, including weapons and ammunition.

## **Egypt:**

During the early stages of the Syrian conflict, Egypt's involvement was barely evident. The Egyptian government at the time, which was led by President Hosni Mubarak, maintained a cautious stance on the situation in Syria.

In 2012, after Mohamed Morsi came into power, Egypt's foreign policy, including its stance on Syria, shifted drastically.

Under the new President, Egypt expressed strong support for the Syrian opposition. They criticised the Assad regime's violent crackdown on protesters and called for international action against the regime.

In 2013, Egypt continued to support the Syrian opposition, both diplomatically and through increased advocacy for international pressure on the Assad regime.