

SYRIA, AN AGONIZING COUNTRY. THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE CONFLICT

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Abstract: The Syrian conflict that broke out in March 2011 seems to not end anytime soon. For various reasons, the efforts of the international community to stop the civil war have not been successful. The Assad regime, still supported by Russia and Iran, even if has lost more and more ground against opposition forces, including the access to oil resources, is not willing to cede power. The state of insecurity and dissatisfaction in the region has increased the influence of radical Islamic groups, such as the Islamic State. In all this time, the socio-economic situation and the environment have deteriorated continuously. Nearly half of the population is displaced within or outside the country, living in poverty, many settlements are in ruins, and public services are not functional.

Key words: Syria, civil war, conflict's effects

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INTRODUCTION

Syria is confronted with a civil war that has resulted in more than 200,000 victims, over 3.7 million refugees, significant property damage and cities lying in ruin. The negative impact of the civil war was felt in all spheres of political and socio-economic life, as well as in the environmental quality. Despite all the events that have occurred, this conflict, which broke out in 2011 as a result of popular discontent against the Assad regime, has not been solved even after four years since it began. The failure in conflict management, for which are responsible all stakeholders, including the international community, has made violence, war crimes and the abuses against fundamental human rights be common features of these years. The political and economic situation, as well as the quality of life in general, has deteriorated from year to year, although they were not very high even before the war. Towards the end of 2014, about 10.8 million Syrians needed humanitarian assistance (BBC News 8.12.2014).

According to Amnesty International, Syria has been crossing a major crisis from the points of view of human rights and humanitarian situation. Both governmental forces and the other parties involved in the conflict, especially the Islamic State, have seriously violated the human rights; many cases of arbitrary detention, torture, abductions, disappearances or extrajudicial executions have been reported all these years.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to analyze the socio-economic, political and environmental effects of the long-term conflict in Syria. The investigation relies on the analysis and interpretation of the data coming from various sources: Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), Syrian Centre for Policy Research, US Energy Information Administration (EIA), Food and Agriculture Organization, etc.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The socio-demographic impact. At the beginning of 2011, Syria had a population of about 22 million inhabitants, the children and the young people under 25 accounting for 56% (DESA, 2014). According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, more than 200,000 people lost their lives since the beginning of the conflict. Only in 2014, 76,000 people were killed, of which 17,790 civilians and 3,500 children. Similar values have been presented by other sources as well, among which the United Nations. Many other people were injured or mutilated. Besides, 2014 was the year when most people were killed, if one compares the situation with the previous years, as follows: 73,447 in 2013, 49,294 in 2012 and 7,841 in 2011 (NYT, 1.01.2015). In addition, nearly half of the population was forced to abandon their houses, their jobs and their way of living, in order to find safer places and escape violence. Therefore, 6.5 million people moved to other areas within the country, while 3.7 million fled across the borders (figure 1). In January 2015, of those who left the country, 1.5 million took refuge in Turkey, 1.1 million in Lebanon, 621,000 in Jordan, 235,000 in Irak and 136,000 in Egypt (UNHCR, 2015).

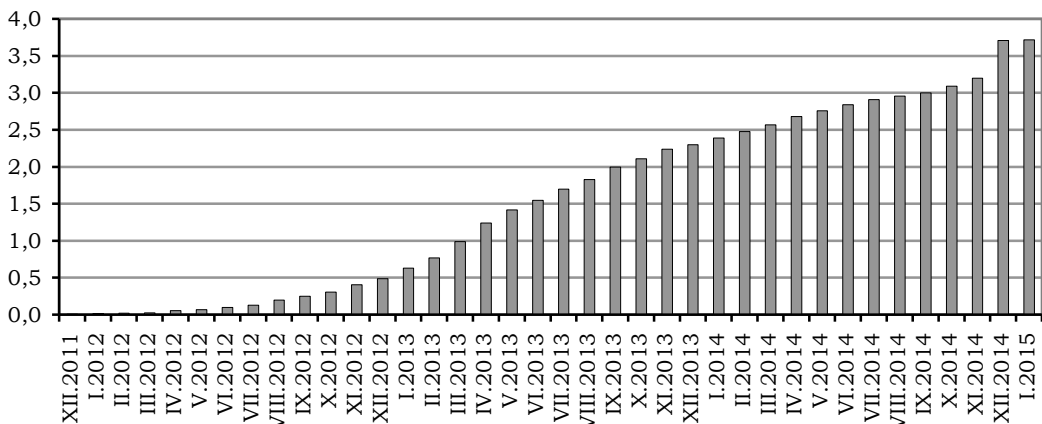


Figure 1. The evolution of the number of Syrian refugees recorded outside the country borders in the period December 2011 – January 2015
(Source: UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency, 2015)

Besides the officially recorded refugees, living in camps, other hundred thousand Syrians sought shelter in the cities and villages of the neighboring countries, according to the estimates of the governments of these states, especially Turkey and Jordan.

The conflict had traumatic effects on many Syrians, because some of their family members were killed, injured or disappeared, the houses were destroyed or damaged, jobs were insecure, and the prices for basic services (food, electric power, fuel, medication, etc.) were high. In comparison with the regions administered by the government, which benefit of many public services, in the territories controlled by the rebels (30%-40% of the country) the situation is serious: economic activities are almost completely absent, public services (education, health, power supply) are not operational, commodities are lacking, while poverty and famine are widespread (Yazigi, 2014). But problems also occur in the regions controlled by the Assad regime. During the Latakia governorate, the war led to considerable demographic changes because many people came there from elsewhere seeking refuge from ongoing military conflict. Before the war, the port of Latakia was known as the unofficial capital of the Syrian Alawites, as they accounted for 70% of the city's population. Since the beginning of the conflict, about one million Syrians, mostly Sunnis, settled there, generating fear and discontent.

The Syrians who left the country are not better off. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other organizations and humanitarian groups, together with the authorities of the states bordering Syria, cooperate in order to provide people in need with the basic products: tents, mattresses, food, water, health care. In the refugee camps like Zaatari in Jordan, the living conditions are poor (Kawakibi, 2013). Here, the most affected are the children, many coming from broken families, who apart from food, water, shelter or hygiene also have special medical needs, including psychological, as well as education needs (in the refugee camps teachers are few in number, although schools have been established).

The Syrians who have settled outside the refugee camps, have stirred up strong frustration among the local communities, because of the pressures exerted on economy, infrastructure, resources and public services, which have resulted in higher prices for food, fuels, electrical power or rents, as well as in a tough competition for jobs. According to the analysis undertaken by MercyCorp in October 2012, such a situation occurred in the city of Mafraq in North Jordan. The survey conducted on this occasion revealed that 80% of the residents of Mafraq thought that Syrians should be hosted in refugee camps, separated by the communities. A more serious situation, which led to violence, occurred in Gaziatep City lying in the southeast of Turkey, where the Syrian refugees have come to account for 10% of the population. Likewise, according to BBC News (25.08.2014), hundreds of people clashed with the Turkish police during a protest against the growing number of Syrian refugees.

The impact on the economy. Before the conflict broke out, Syria's economy, although not very developed, was diversified and dominated by services and industry, oil sector and tourism having the most significant shares. The average economic growth rate in the period 2000-2010 was 5%. Apart from hydrocarbons, which ensured the largest part of the country's incomes, Syria also relied on its significant resources of phosphates, chromium, iron ores,

manganese, gypsum, marble and other construction rocks. The long duration of the conflict has led to the collapse of the Syrian economy, especially after the European Union and the United States imposed sanctions against oil export in the fall of 2011. Another important reason was the extension of the conflict to Damascus and Aleppo in the summer of 2012. These two cities were the largest economic centers of the country, holding together more than 50% of the manufacturing sector of Syria (Yazigi, 2014). The conflict affected all economic sectors and was responsible for the deterioration or destruction of important parts of industrial, commercial, tourist and transportation infrastructures. The trade was strongly disrupted, the national currency depreciated, public debt increased (because of the imports of oil and capital goods), while purchasing power dropped. In November 2013, the prices of cereals and other food products increased by 100%, in comparison with the previous year (FAO, 2014).

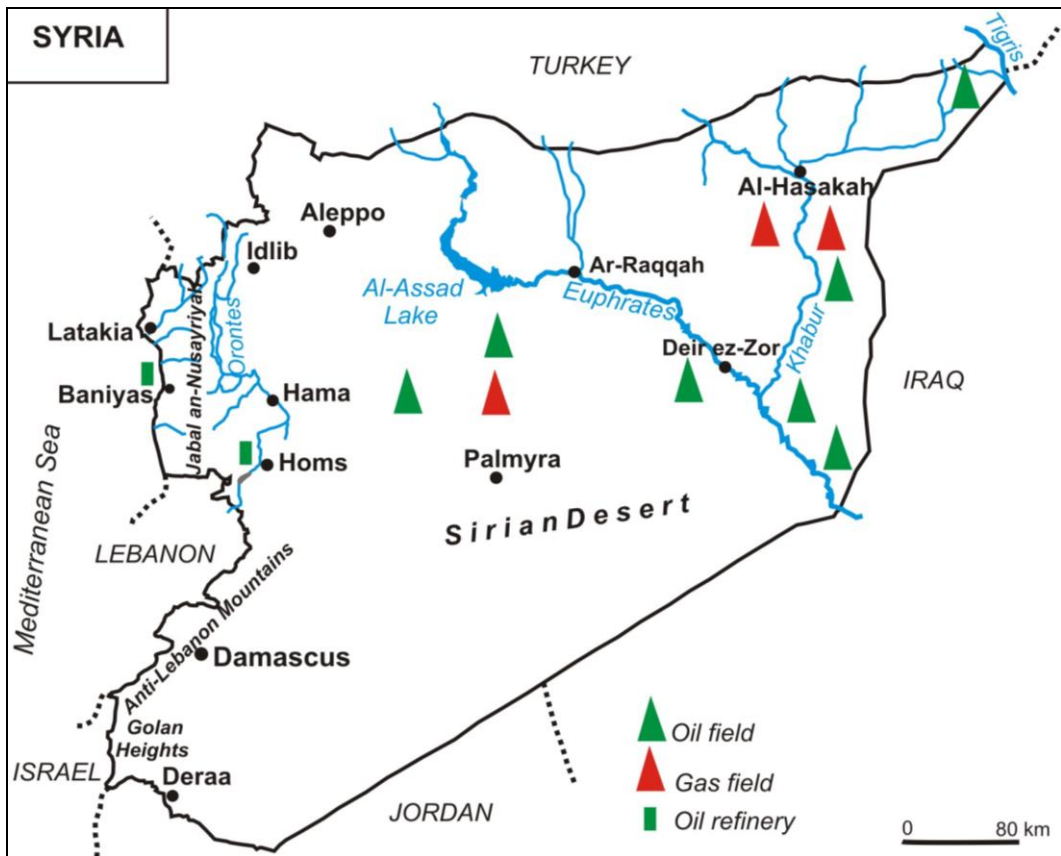


Figure 2. Syria. General map

At the end of 2013, unemployment exceeded 54%, while 75% of the population was living in poverty, of which 54% in extreme poverty (World Bank, 2014). According to the Syrian Centre for Policy Research, at the end of 2013 the total economic loss considered since the beginning of the conflict was estimated at 143.8 billion dollars, i.e. 276% of the GDP of 2010. If the civil war would end soon, it is estimated that, at an economic growth of 5% per year, three decades would be necessary for the GDP to reach the level of 2010 (Yazigi, 2014).

In 2010, the oil sector, which relied on confirmed reserves of 2.5 billion barrels and a production of 386,000 barrels per day, was extremely important for Syria, as it ensured about a quarter of the governmental incomes. More than 90% of the crude oil exports, i.e. around 150,000 barrels per day, went to the European Union. According to the Energy Information Administration, because of the civil war and international sanctions, Syria's oil production dropped dramatically, recording in 2014 only 25,000 barrels per day. The government's incomes dropped accordingly. Besides the destruction of oil infrastructure and the international sanctions, at the end of 2013 the Assad regime lost control of the northeastern part of the country, where the main hydrocarbon resources lie (figure 2). In addition, this region is crossed by the Euphrates, which ensures the greatest amount of water for the country, especially for the irrigation of agricultural lands.

Although the oil products are vital to the war machine, because of the nearby clashes and the difficulties in supply the Homs refinery operated only for a short period of time. On the other hand, the Baniyas refinery, located in the area controlled by the authorities, has suffered less and its production has taken advantage of the oil imported with Iranian help (Reuters, 19.09.2014). The gas production, although important for electric power generation, also dropped by about 30% in comparison with the pre-war period. At the same time, the infrastructure for power generation, including the electric power stations and the power transmission lines, have been the target of sabotage actions.

Despite the facts that large areas of the country are arid or semi-arid, that water resources are low and droughts are frequent, agriculture managed to provide part of the necessary food for the population and even to export some products like cotton, vegetables, fruits, sheep and cattle. Before the conflict, agriculture played an important part in the Syrian economy, having contribution levels of 18% to the GDP and 17% to the labor force. About 10 million Syrians, representing 46% of the population, were living then in the countryside and 80% of them were dependent on agriculture (FAO, 2013). The war had a devastating impact on agriculture; it hindered the supply with seeds, fertilizers, veterinary drugs, and fuel, which explained the high prices of these products, the deterioration of irrigation canals and agricultural machinery, the decay of storage facilities, as well as the people behavior, who left the farms because of the violence. According to FAO, the wheat production of 2013, as well as the one estimated for 2014, was less than two million tons, i.e. less than half in comparison with the normal years prior to the crisis.

Before the conflict, Syria was an appreciated tourist destination and the number of tourists was on the increase. In 2010, the country was visited by 8.5 million tourists, meaning 40% more tourists in comparison with 2009, which generated incomes of 8.3 billion dollars (Bloomberg, 3.01.2011). This economic sector had a significant contribution to the GDP (12%) and provided for 11% of the jobs (Al Arabiya News, 29.08.2012). As soon as the conflict broke out, Syria became a dangerous country for tourists. Most of the states that supplied the tourists banned travel to Syria, many hotels were shut down or suffered serious damage, especially in Aleppo, while tourist companies, like Wild Frontiers Tour Operator, left the country (Telegraph Travel, 19.03.2014).

The major tourist sites, which were also the main attractions, were deteriorated by bombing and robberies. In June 2013, UNESCO included six Syrian sites on the List of World Heritage in Danger: the cities of Damascus and

Aleppo, the ruins of Bosra (the ancient capital of the Roman province Arabia, lying 40 km southeast of Deraa) and Palmyra, the Cracs de Chevalier Castle, and the Saladin's Fortress/ Qal'al Salah el-Din (30 km east of Latakia). In Aleppo, the minaret of 1099 of the Umayyad Mosque, one of the oldest and the most important in the country, dating from 715, was destroyed. Significant damage also suffered the Crac des Chevalier Castle (1142-1271), located 60 km west of Homs, and the ruins of Palmyra, 215 km northeast of Damascus, an important city of antiquity.

All international airlines suspended their flights to and from Syria after the violence broke out, while the national company SyrianAir has been banned from all European Union airports since October 2012.

Division of political power. Territorially speaking, Syria is controlled by numerous political and military entities, the boundaries between these parties varying considerably since the beginning of the conflict. The Assad regime, still strongly supported by Russia, Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah, still retained controll of some western territories at the end of 2014 and the beginning of 2015 (figure 3).

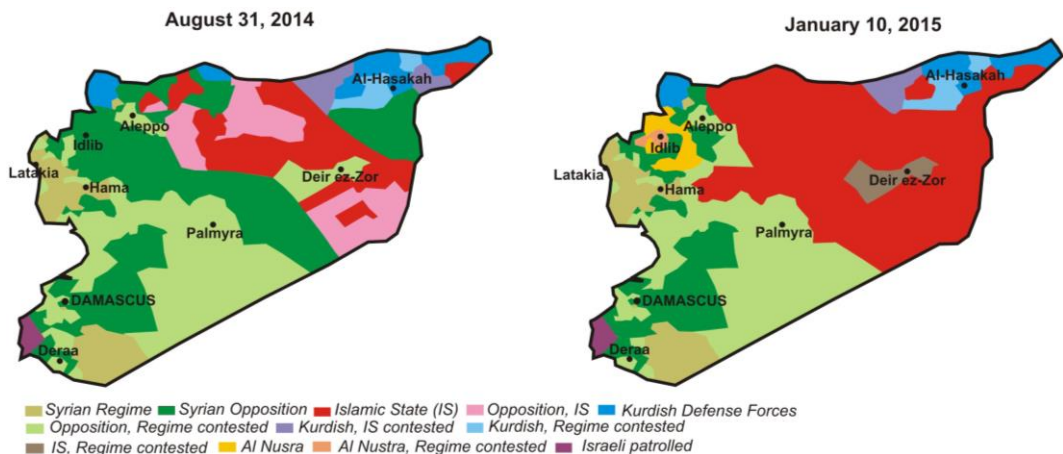


Figure 3. Syria. Dynamics of political and territorial control
(Source: Processing after Coalition for a Democratic Syria, 2015)

The forces opposing the Assad regime are split into about 1,000 groups with 100,000 fighters (BBC News 8.12.2014), with large differences of identity and ideology, including jihadist groups like the Islamic State (IS), the former Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and Al-Nusra Front. The National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, an alliance of moderate opposition composed of four political blocks (Democratic Party of the Arab Socialist Union, National Democratic Block, National Alliance, and Movement for a Free and Democratic Syria), supported by the Free Syrian Army, is considered the only legitimate representative of the Syrian people by many states like the USA, France, Italy, Germany, Great Britain, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Qatar.

The Islamic Front, created in November 2013 through the merger of seven important islamic groups (Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, Suqour al-Sham, Al-Haqq Brigades, Ansar al-Sham, Army of Islam și Kurdish Islamic Front), is an

alternative to the Syrian National Coalition, which is committed to build an Islamic state based on Sharia. In the second half of 2014, the Islamic State extremist group was very active and gained more ground. This radical Islamic group, which intends to create a Caliphate in the region, governed according to the Islamic law (Sharia), by its brutal actions, including killings and abductions, sparked worldwide concern, which justified the air strikes launched by the United States (September 2014).

According to ACAPS, the Islamic State utterly controls the Raqqa governorate and significant parts of the governorates of Aleppo, in the north, and Al-Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor, in the east (figure 3). The various armed groups of the Syrian opposition control territories in Idlib and Hama, in the north, and, to a lesser extent, in Deraa and Quneitra, in the south.

Environmental degradation. Although an accurate assessment is difficult, because the conflict is underway, the observers believe that the impact of the civil war on environment and people's health is significant. The negative effects on the environment are especially due to the military activities. The large amounts of weapons and ammunition used by the combatants, including the air raids of the United States and their allies, have released toxic substances, for instance heavy metals. Some explosives like TNT and RDX are potentially carcinogen and toxic for living organisms. These substances, together with the smoke and oil leakings in the extraction and processing areas controlled by the rebels, the dust from collapsed buildings (which may contain asbestos and other poisonous substances), the destruction of industrial areas, and the robbery of chemical plants, have polluted air, water (including groundwater) and soils. Where the impact on soil cover is serious, because of explosions and chemical contaminations, the fertility is reduced or lost for good, and consequently lands become barren.

According to PAX, a non-governmental organization cited by the United Civilians (23.09.2014), if the war would end now, nature would need 25 years to recover. Until then, water and soil will be already contaminated and the accumulated toxic substances will significantly affect human health, including that of the future generations (increased number of children born with handicaps or suffering from cancer). According to the data provided by PAX, about 40% of the bombs fallen in Syria did not explode on impact.

There are also indirect effects of the conflict, which are associated with population movement and the suspension or the limitation of the activity of environmental institutions or of the national plans aiming to control desertification, biological diversification and climatic changes. But the implementation of such plans is all the more urgent as Syria is a country extremely vulnerable to climate changes, and especially to desertification, having large arid and semi-arid areas and limited amounts of water, and being exposed to severe climatic fluctuations. Likewise, the large number of people who fled war zones in search for a safer life strongly impacts the environment in the regions where they settled down.

CONCLUSIONS

Syria is an example of the failure of national and international policies. On a national scale, the dissatisfaction that led to civil war was generated by the fact that the Assad regime failed to manage efficiently the political, socio-

economic and environmental problems of the country, and was reluctant to promote reforms for the advent of democracy and the enthronement of human rights. Syria's present situation, characterized by a serious humanitarian crisis, a collapsed economy, destroyed settlements and degraded environment, stands for the political failure of the international community, which was not able to identify solutions or concrete measures for ending the conflict. This particular case, which is neither the first nor the only one, should give much food for thought to the authorities and to the national and international political institutions. All these are called upon to identify the policies, programs and proper strategies capable to foster the establishment of democracy, the protection of fundamental human rights, the sustainable development of economy, and the preservation of environment.

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