

Cyclone

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Marking a decade to the Arab Spring:
The turmoil that changed the Middle East

A Decade to the Syrian Tragedy

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In March 2011, Moawiya and Samer Sayasina, two 15-year-olds from Dara`a in Southern Syria, were arrested after getting caught spraying graffiti on the walls of local houses that read: "Your turn, Doctor", and effectively demanding that Bashar Assad renounce his presidency. The young boys disappeared, leading locals to protest in Dara`a, and the regime to respond with violence. These events marked the beginning of the "Syrian Spring" – a short-lived popular riot at the center of which was the call for political change in which Muslims and Christians, Kurds and members of other minorities alike had participated.

That short spring soon turned into a stormy and bloody "Islamic winter", followed by a civil war during which the regime ruthlessly fought its citizens. Foreign actors and militias soon deployed across Syria, while the Syrians themselves were playing the roles of both victims and refugees in a campaign that soon transformed into one of the worst tragedies the modern Middle East has seen.

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This war has claimed the lives of over half a million people, turning every other Syrian into a refugee or displaced person. The campaign also crossed over the Syrian borders, its shockwaves spilling into the region and still felt today, particularly in Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq, but also internationally, mostly in Europe, where millions of Syrian refugees sought asylum.

A decade down the line, eight key changes that have resulted from the regional turmoil can be traced in Syria:

1. **The disappearance of the nation state?:** Since the Ba'ath Party took control of Syria in 1963, the regime in Damascus has sought to project an image whereby a modern Arab nation-state was being established in which the national foundation is stronger than the other super-national or sub-national identities. Reality in Syria today contradicts the vision that its rulers attempted to nurture for four decades. The war, which soon became sectorial, revealed the Syrian system's weakness, as well as the fact that its religious, sectarian, and ethnic identity roots have not only refused to vanish, but have in fact been preserved all the while deep in locals' minds, erupting with a vengeance as soon as the state structure was shaken.
2. **A demographic decline:** After a decade of bloody fighting, more than 6.6 million Syrians – the majority of them Sunni – out of 21 million who were living in Syria up to that point, have become refugees. Most of them are in neighboring countries (namely Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan), and 6.7 million displaced persons are within Syrian borders. Moreover, the Shiite and Alawi have strengthened their overall weight in the population, a trend that has grown stronger due to the Sunnis' mass immigration from Syria, and the Shiites' entrenchment in areas previously populated by Sunnis and Christians.
3. **The collapse of the economy and no recovery in sight:** The war had crushed the Syrian economy, which shrank substantially by more than 70% between 2010 and 2017. In early 2011, the Syrian Lira was typically stable at about 50 Lira per U.S. Dollar; however, when war broke out, the local currency collapsed, reaching an unprecedented low – about 2,000 Lira per U.S. Dollar in May 2020. These days, the cost of rehabilitating Syria is estimated to be anywhere between 250 billion and one trillion U.S. Dollars.
4. **The fragility of the central regime:** Ten years after the civil war began, the Syrian regime is incapable of regaining control over large parts of the country, particularly in the north west and north east. Parts of northern Syria are now occupied by Turkey or its proxies, and others – especially east of the Euphrates – are under Kurdish control with American support. ISIS cells remain active in eastern Syria, while other militia groups are operating unhindered across the

country, enjoying both Iranian and Syrian support. The Syrian rebels, with Turkey's support, continue to have a stronghold on large areas of Idlib. As for the fabric of life, the fighting has led to the suspension of commercial flights for long periods of time, as well as to the closing off of roads and border crossings. Social issues have also been exacerbated, such as crime, drug trafficking, and a soaring suicide rate.

5. **The Syrian Arab Army – less Syrian and less Arab:** Before the civil war broke out, the SAA was estimated to amount to some 300,000 troops, comprised primarily of conscript soldiers. In October 2015, estimates had dropped to 80,000-100,000 soldiers due to high casualty rates and waves of defectors. The army that had trained to cope with both internal and external threats found itself focusing on a civil war in which chemical warfare was used and barrel bombs dropped on densely populated areas. Moreover, the army ranks were filled with Shiite "ringers" – most of them under Iranian auspices – and bolstered by Russian command consultants, Iranians, and Hizballah operatives.
6. **The establishment of the Assad Family as a ruling dynasty:** The Assad Dynasty has celebrated 50 years to its establishment, rendering it the longest-ruling non-monarchical family in the modern Arab world. All family members play key roles in the Syrian government, as they have done for the past half a century, and are supported by the Alawi sect, who believes their dominant status guarantees its dominance and, indeed, its survival in Syria. The Assad Dynasty now faces opposition that is no more than an amorphous body comprised of several groups with different and even contrasting ideologies. Many of its leaders have been exiled or disposed of, and, at least at present, it is hard to view the opposition as a force capable of serving as an alternative to the Assad Dynasty.
7. **Iran – here to stay:** While Tehran was Syria's strategic ally before the civil war began, its deep involvement in it has certainly brought the two regimes much closer. In fact, it has led to the Assad regime's dependency on Iran, transforming the latter into the most significant external force at play in Syria. The Iranians' participation in the war – through the supply of weapons, military consultation, and sending of Shiite militia groups – has replaced the weakened Syrian Army. At the heart of the Iranian effort is Hizballah, which focused on the Lebanese arena since its inception, and has found itself fighting in the Syrian one relatively quickly as Iran's proxy.