

# Factsheet: Syrian Revolution Overview

## ***When and why did the Syrian Revolution start?***

The Syrian Revolution is an uprising against more than 50 years of suffocating dictatorship under the Assad regime that squelched all forms of free speech, civil society and political expression. It started in March 2011 amidst a wave of pro-democracy protests across the Arab World.

The first protests took place in the southern province of Deraa, where initially protesters were only asking for local reforms and a change in governor. After the Assad regime's violent reaction to demonstrators, peaceful protests quickly escalated into a nationwide uprising of all sects and ethnicities.

## ***Why is there armed conflict in Syria today?***

Starting July 2011, with Syrian Army defections mounting in protest of the crackdown, groups of defectors coalesced into Free Syrian Army units to protect protesters. Gradually, these units expelled regime forces from their areas, triggering an even more brutal crackdown and open armed conflict.

From mid-2011 until February 2012, the Free Syrian Army established a base in the central city of Homs, which was then known as the "Capital of the Revolution." In February 2012, the regime launched an offensive against Homs that entailed deploying artillery on densely populated neighborhoods.

This escalation in brutality only galvanized the armed opposition. Over the next year, residents across Syria took up arms to defend themselves against Assad's brutality. Wide swathes of Syria became liberated areas under Free Syrian Army control, especially in Syria's north and east.

## ***What happened to areas that expelled Assad?***

Initially, Syrians experienced their first taste of democracy and civil society in over 50 years. Province-wide elections occurred in March 2013 in the northern province of Aleppo, and local elections occurred in countless municipalities and towns.<sup>i</sup> Overall, local residents established 760 "local administrative councils," some democratic and some appointed by consensus.<sup>ii</sup>

Unfortunately, the local councils ran into myriad difficulties. Starting in July 2012, the regime escalated its crackdown yet again through airstrikes against anti-regime areas it could no longer reach by ground. Liberated areas closer to Assad territories were often besieged and at risk of systematic slaughter if recaptured by the regime. Virtually all liberated areas experienced major shortages in essential goods.

## ***Why is the Syrian Revolution weaker now than it once was?***

Militarily, the rebels have lost ground for multiple reasons. In Homs, intervention by Lebanese pro-Assad terror group Hezbollah turned the tide between June 2013-May 2014. In Aleppo, regime air attacks with "barrel bombs" starting September 2013 have placed Assad close to besieging the city. In the east, ISIS took most rebel territory from June-July 2014 with U.S. weapons captured in Mosul.

Even in areas still under rebel control, the original democratic ideals of the Revolution are weaker. Hardline Islamic groups, which are better-armed and better-funded, have gained legitimacy by providing protection and social services where the FSA and local councils could not. Disillusion at Western refusal to stop Assad's atrocities has also led some Syrians to reject democracy as a "Western implant."

***Bashar al-Assad, World's Bloodiest Dictator:***

Since February 2012, when Assad regime bombardment of civilian neighborhoods began in earnest, Assad's forces have slaughtered more civilians than any other armed group in the world, including ISIS.

Reporting is not completely accurate, and numbers are almost certainly higher, but since the uprising began in 2011, at least 200,000 people are estimated have been killed.iii This is the equivalent of Akron, OH, Salt Lake City, UT or Knoxville, TN being wiped out.iv Half of these people are believed to be civilians.v

These numbers are certainly higher as the UN report catalogued only violent deaths in which a name, date and location was available.vi This report did not account for deaths where names, dates, etc., were unavailable, as well as in cases in which disease or starvation, indirect causes of death due to the war, claimed lives.

The death toll has not abated with time. In over 30 months of conflict, at least 100,000 of the casualties stem from the last 14 months.vii

***A Historic Humanitarian Crisis:***

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, has called the humanitarian crisis in Syria the "biggest humanitarian emergency of our era."

“Almost half of all Syrians have now been forced to abandon their homes and flee for their lives. One in every eight Syrians has fled across the border, fully a million more than a year ago. A further 6.5 million are displaced within Syria. Over half of those uprooted are children.”viii

Half of all Syrians have been forced to flee their homes. That would be equivalent to 135 million Americans being forced to leave their homes.ix

On average, more than 100,000 Syrians register as refugees every month.x

At least half of the internally displaced refugees, as well as those Syrians seeking refuge abroad, are under the age of 18.xi

By April 2013, there were some 800,000 Syrian refugees total. In less than four months that number would more than double to over 1.6 million.

Today, roughly 43% of Syria's pre-war population of 22 million people are refugees, which equates to almost 10 million people.

**The brutality with which Assad has destroyed his own country proves that Syrians were right to seek his ouster. America and the world should act immediately to help fulfill Syrian aspirations for freedom and dignity!**

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According to a UN report, the number, as of August 2014 stands at 191,369 people killed in the Syrian civil war: Price, Megan, Anita Gohdes and Patrick Ball. 08/2014. Office of the UN Commissioner for Human Rights. ohchr.org. "Updated Statistical Analysis of Documentation of Killings in the Syrian Arab Republic." *Human Rights Data Analysis Group*.

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