

A Comprehensive Analysis of the Syrian Conflict from the Perspectives of International Humanitarian Law and Economic Impact

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Abstract: The Syrian War started in 2011 as a result of the Arab Spring, which shook the entire Arabian Peninsula. The Syrian War is considered one of the most devastating conflicts of recent times, as around 0.6 million people have lost their lives. This war has also created one of the biggest refugee crises in the world. There are various reports that in many cities in Syria, people are on the verge of starvation. The brutality of this war can be imagined, as some of the most important cities in the country have completely become ghost towns. The war has been continuing for the last 13 years, and there are still no visible signs that it will end soon. This paper will analyse this war from an international humanitarian law perspective. The paper will determine whether the international humanitarian laws outlined in the Four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their additional protocols were indeed adhered to during this conflict or not. The paper will discuss the role played by the United Nations in the Syrian war. The impact of this war on Syria's economy will also be discussed.

Keywords – *International Humanitarian Laws, Human Rights, Syrian War, Refugee Crisis, United Nations, Economic Impact.*

Introduction

“To deny people their human rights is to challenge their very humanity.”

– Nelson Mandela

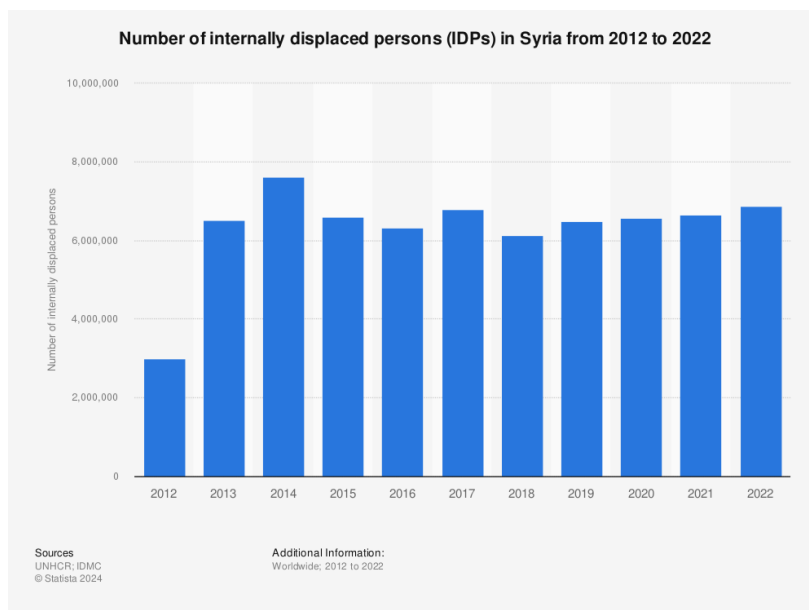
Syrian Arab Republic also known as Syria is a country in Middle East. It is surrounded by Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea in the west, Turkey in the north, Iraq in the east, Jordan in the south and Israel in the southwest.

The country is suffering from a Civil War which is an ongoing armed conflict fought between the forces of dictator Bashar al-Assad, along with its allies, and various rebel groups opposing the government. Bashar al-Assad belongs to Alawaite Shia community which only makes 8% of the total population of Syria. The Bashar al-Assad's government has been accused for discriminating with the majority Sunni Arab population.

The civil war started in March 2011 when security forces of Dictator Bashar Al Assad shoot dead peaceful protestors in southern city of Deraa who were demanding the release of political prisoners. After this more protests against the dictator occurred throughout the country, but they were also suppressed brutally. This led to violence and unrest throughout the country.

The Syrian Civil War is characterized by multifaceted conflict involving various factions, each vying for control and influence within the nation. Principal actors include the Syrian Government, led by President Bashar al-Assad and supported by allies, a coalition of rebel groups spearheaded by the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Moreover, numerous regional and international actors have directly intervened or provided support to different factions, contributing to the complexity and protraction of the conflict. [1]

Originating from opposition to the Assad regime, the Free Syrian Army emerged as a significant force, seizing control of considerable territory from government forces. However, this development has engendered a protracted and violent struggle for power, accompanied by widespread allegations of severe human rights violations and numerous massacres perpetrated by all major belligerents, including the Syrian government, ISIL, and various rebel factions. The toll in human lives is staggering, with estimates ranging from 500,000 to 600,000 fatalities, and the conflict has precipitated a profound refugee crisis, both within Syria and across its borders.



Despite numerous peace initiatives launched by international bodies such as the United Nations, the conflict persists unabated, underscoring the intransigence of the parties involved and the formidable obstacles to achieving a sustainable resolution. Efforts at mediation and negotiation have been largely stymied by deep-seated grievances, geopolitical rivalries, and the absence of a unified international approach. Consequently, the Syrian Civil War stands as a sobering testament to the enduring challenges of conflict resolution in the contemporary global arena.[2]

Table 1 - This table lists the largest Syrian refugee-hosting countries in 2022 along with the number of Syrian refugees each country hosts.

Rank	Country	Number of Refugees
1	Turkey	3,535,898
2	Lebanon	815,874
3	Jordan	675,334
4	Germany	665,270
5	Iraq	344,712
6	Egypt	138,398
7	Sweden	114,255
8	Sudan	93,497
9	United States	46,266
10	Greece	37,222

Human Rights Law and its Violations

Human rights encompass moral precepts or normative standards delineating the permissible conduct and entitlements inherent to human beings, often codified and safeguarded within both domestic legal frameworks and international legal regimes. These rights serve as foundational principles underpinning the ethical treatment and dignity of individuals, universally recognized and upheld as fundamental to the preservation of human welfare and autonomy.

Embedded within the fabric of legal systems at both national and international levels, human rights entail a comprehensive spectrum of entitlements encompassing civil, political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions. These rights are predicated upon the inherent dignity and worth of every human being, emphasizing their entitlement to equitable treatment, non-discrimination, and protection from harm or exploitation.

Furthermore, human rights extend beyond mere moral injunctions, constituting enforceable legal guarantees enshrined within domestic constitutions, statutes, and international treaties. The legal framework surrounding human rights provides avenues for redress, accountability, and enforcement mechanisms to safeguard against violations and ensure adherence to established norms of conduct.

In essence, human rights serve as a cornerstone of legal and moral discourse, embodying essential principles of justice, equality, and respect for human dignity. Their recognition and protection constitute a fundamental imperative for the promotion of societal harmony, individual flourishing, and the realization of a more just and equitable global order.

When state actors—or non-state actors—abuse, disregard, or deny fundamental human rights, such as civil, political, cultural, social, and economic rights, these activities constitute human rights violations. Human rights violations are observed by numerous autonomous non-governmental organisations, including Amnesty International, the International Federation of Human Rights, Human Rights Watch, the World Organisation Against Torture, Freedom House, the International Freedom of Expression Exchange, and Anti-Slavery International, in addition to United Nations committees, national institutions, and governments. These organisations gather proof and documentation of purported violations of human rights, then exert pressure on governments to uphold the law.

Human Rights Violation by Syrian Government and Allied Forces

According to a 2011 UN report, Syrian armed and security forces may be responsible for:

- Unlawful killings of civilians which even includes children, healthcare workers and general patients at the hospitals (“In some grave cases, the entire families were executed by the government forces including women and elderly people”);
- Extreme torture of civilians which even includes minor boys, hospital patients (sometimes to death), also sexual violence against women and girls and psychological torture.;
- Unjustified mass arrests of entire neighbourhoods;
- Use of tanks, artilleries and helicopters in compact civilian areas;
- Extensive and targeted shelling of residential areas;
- Collective punishment of entire neighbourhoods;
- Kidnapping of civilian population;
- Large-scale, deliberate property vandalism and destruction of property of civilians;
- Denial of basic human needs like water, food, medicines etc in many civilian areas.; and
- Preventing of civilians from taking basic medical treatment, even children.[3]

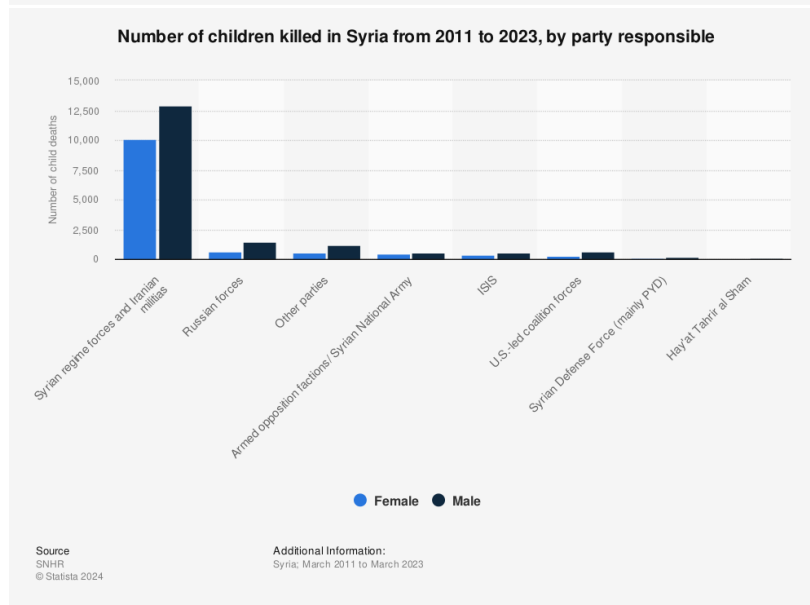
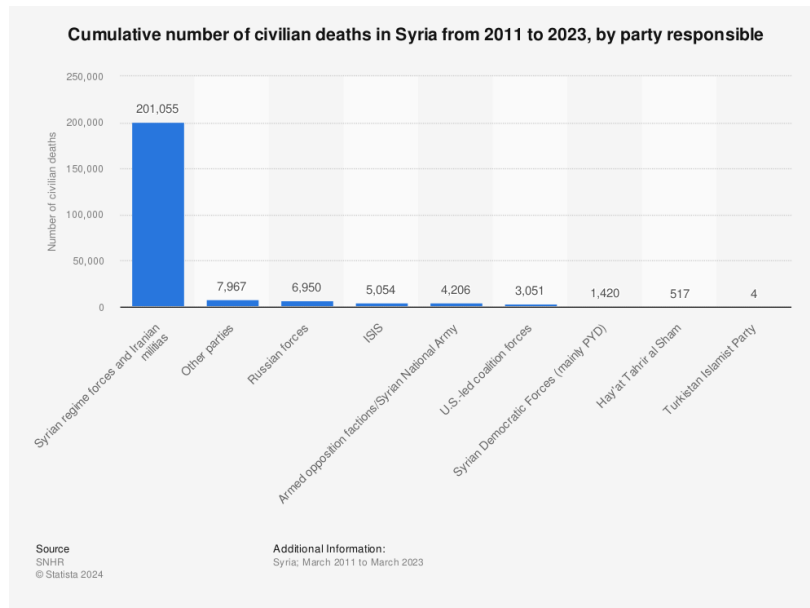
1. Attack on Civilians:

Most of the violations of Human Rights in Syria are done by the Syrian Government itself. It has been stated that the Assad regime and its allies have persisted in carrying out lethal and indiscriminate military attacks on cities, residential areas, and civilian infrastructure. All around the nation, there are frequently attacks on homes, water stations, bakeries, markets, hospitals, mosques, churches, synagogues, and centres for the civil defence forces.[4]

In cities and territories under opposition control, the Syrian government has used artillery rounds and rockets to assault civilians at bread bakeries. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported some of the incidents of Aleppo province and Aleppo city where Assad forces bombed bread bakeries.[5] Human Rights Watch said that, “these are war crimes, as the only military targets in the areas were rebels but dozens of civilians were killed.” [6]

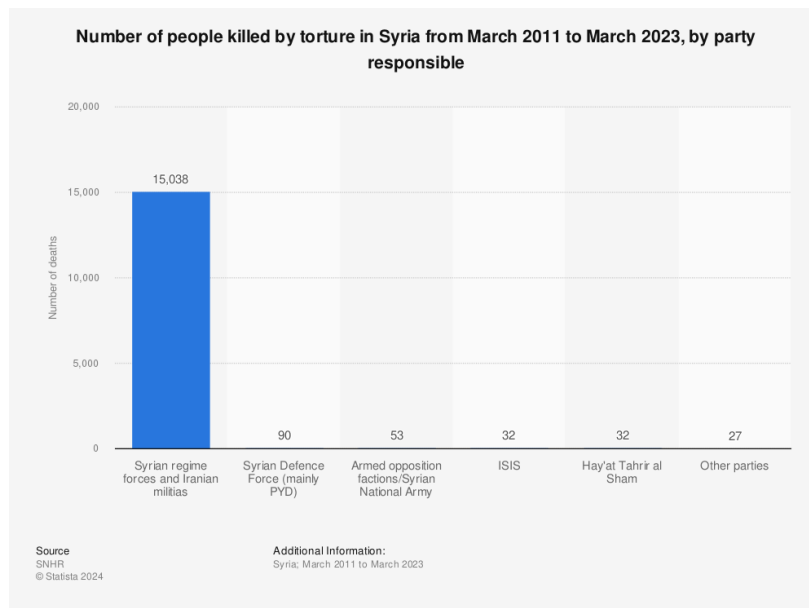
HRW is also having “evidence of ongoing cluster bomb attacks” by Syria’s air force. HRW has confirmed reports “through interviews with victims, other residents and activists who filmed the cluster munitions”, as well as “analysis of 64 videos and also photos showing weapon remnants” of cluster bomb strikes.[7] The use, production, stockpiling, and transfer of cluster munitions is prohibited by the 2008 International Convention on Cluster Munitions treaty. Use of cluster bombs have been considered a grave threat to civilian populations because of the bombs’ ability to randomly scatter thousands of submunitions over a vast area, many of which remain waiting to explode, taking civilian lives and limbs long after the conflict is over.[8]

Forces loyal to dictator Bashar Al Assad has been accused of using “barrel bombs” to carry out attacks on civilian populations in rebel held territories. The bombs are “cheaply made, locally produced, and typically constructed from large oil drums, gas cylinders, and water tanks, filled with high explosives and scrap metal to enhance fragmentation, and then dropped from helicopters”.[9]



2. Violation of Rights of Prisoners:

There a thousand of prisoners in the jails of Syrian Government. Most of the prisoners were detained without any reason and no opportunity of fair trial was given to them. The rights given to prisoner in Third Geneva Convention were totally overseen. The government has also prohibited the independent monitoring of prison or detention centre conditions. According to three eminent international lawyers Sir Desmond Lorenz de Silva QC, former chief prosecutor of the special court for Sierra Leone, Sir Geoffrey Nice QC, former lead prosecutor of former Yugoslavian president Slobodan Milosevic and Professor David Crane, who indicted President Charles Taylor of Liberia at the Sierra Leone court in The Syrian Detainee Report 2014 claimed that the Assad Government had killed more than 11,000 detainees in one region during March 2011 to August 2013.[10]



In November 2015, Amnesty International published a report claiming that since the start of the Syrian Civil War, the Syrian regime had arbitrarily removed over 65,000 people.[11] Many of these displaced people are still missing and now most of the agencies believe that they may have been killed. In another report which was released by The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights in May 2016 states that since March 2011, at least 60,000 people had either died as a result of torture or from terrible humanitarian conditions in Syrian government prisons.[12] These reports are quite old and the actual number of prisoners killed till 2024 must have increased significantly since then.

3. Attacks on Medical Personnel:

In international humanitarian law, medical personals, including doctors and para medical workers have been given special protection. These medical personals work as a backbone in order to prevent any grave violations of the human rights of people in an armed conflict. All the Four Geneva Conventions discuss the need for the protection of these medical care personals.

According to IHL, any attack on hospitals, medical facilities and medical personals is strictly prohibited. But the Syrian government and its allies have completely ignored this issue and they are responsible for indiscriminate attacks on these facilities.

The non-governmental organisation Physicians for Human Rights claims to have verified accounts of 566 distinct assaults on 348 hospitals in Syria between March 2011 and May 2019. There have reportedly been close to 900 medical personnel killed in these attacks. Ninety percent of the events that were reported, or 509 in total, had the Syrian government or its allies to blame.[13]

Table 2 – Human Rights Violations of Medical Care Providers from 2011 – 2024.

Number of Medical Facilities Targeted	400 (Atleast)
Number of Times Medical Facilities were Targeted	604
Number of Health Care Providers Killed	949
Number of Health Care Providers Detained	1100

The New Yorker magazine cites that in the five years since the war started “the Syrian government has assassinated, bombed, and tortured to death almost seven hundred medical personnel.” [14]

4. Sexual Violence and Rape:

Sexual violence has remained a weapon of oppressing forces to impose their dominance from time in memorial. This heinous practice has been prevalent in times of war from ancient times and sadly, it is still continuing. International law, human rights law and international humanitarian laws have tried to protect the dignity of a women and has introduced

many laws relating to protection of women and to discourage this practice of sexual violence. But sadly, every time in war, we see that sexual violence has not stopped.

The situation of Syria is no different. Women and girls have been subject to sexual violence and even rapes in this war. International organizations have tried to document this. The Syrian armed forces and the forces loyal to dictator Bashar Al Assad has been accused of abducting and raping civilian women and girls in the areas where there was support for Syrian opposition.

A member of Syrian opposition has provided detailed accounts of women who were subjected to sexual violence and rapes to The Globe and Mail. He was also of the view that many women have come up to tell their stories fearing more oppression and torture from the government forces if they find out.[15]

Many of the refugees from Syria who have fled to Turkey have opened up and have provided detailed reports of mass rapes and sexual violence against women which were committed by the Syrian forces. In one account, Syrian women have reported rape of more than 400 women by Syrian Alawite soldiers.[16] These women were raped only on the basis that they were Sunni Muslim women and the army presumed that they must be supporters of the pro-democracy movement.

Another horrible incident was reported by the Syrian special force sergeant. He exposed the Alawite officers and said that “the Alawite officers ordered the soldiers to rape teenager girls belonging to the Sunni sect in the city of Homs. These teenager girls were systematically raped and were shot dead afterwards.” He further said that “those Syrian army soldiers who refused to rape these girls were also killed.” [17] There are numerous incidents which accused the forces loyal to dictator Bashar Al Assad for committing rapes and sexual violence against innocent Syrian civilians. In an interview in 2012, the then Foreign Minister of Norway, Espen Barth Eide angrily stated that

“Rape during the Bosnian War is repeating itself in Syria.”[18]

About 6,000 women had been raped (including gang-rape) since the conflict began as of late November 2013, according to a report by the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN) titled “Violence against Women, Bleeding Wound in the Syrian Conflict.” Given that most cases go unreported, the actual number of rapes is probably much higher. The majority of raped women became pregnant as a result of the rapes, which occurred “during governmental raids, at checkpoints, and within detention facilities,” according to the EMHRN study.[19]

5. Use of Chemical Weapons:

Since the end of World War II, the international organizations have worked in order to prevent the use of illegal chemical weapons. There are many conventions and international laws, which have made it totally illegal to use any kind of chemical weapons.

Syrian government is believed to have used chemical weapons many times during the conflict. A major chemical attack took place in Ghouta, which is situated in the suburbs of the capital Damascus. This incident resulted in the death of more than 1000 people.[20] The United Nations conducted a fact-finding mission and found out that highly toxic compound Sarin has been used in that attack. It was also found that only the Syrian government forces have access to the stock of chemical weapons and air force, so they are the biggest suspect for the attack.[21]

6. Blocking Humanitarian Aids:

The inhumane practice of blocking humanitarian aid has been prevalent in warfare from ancient times. But in order to stop this the international organizations have worked to develop laws which would make it illegal for any party to block basic humanitarian aid.

The Syrian dictator Assad’s government has been accused by the United Nations for blocking the humanitarian aid from reaching the people in besieged areas.[22] Today, millions of Syrians are trapped in besieged and hard to reach areas, with no access to food, medical supplies, or services - the vast majority imprisoned by Syrian government forces. The Syrian government does not allow the humanitarian aids to reach the besieged areas and it is clear violation of international laws and human rights.

Human Rights Violation by Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other Opposition Groups

The United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry has accused the Free Syrian Army and other Opposition groups fighting in Syria against the forces of dictator Bashar Al Assad of committing various human rights violations. These violations include, the killings and torture of Syrian army soldiers, incidents of kidnapping and hostage

taking and finally, they have also been accused of using minor children in non-combat roles in areas of fighting. This report was published in the year 2012.

1. Child Soldiers:

A 2014 Human Rights Watch report describing the pervasive practice of non-state armed groups using child soldiers included references to the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The report included interviews with children as young as 14 who had served in the FSA.[23]

The Free Syrian Army recruited around 142 young recruits, according to a 2014 UN analysis. According to a UN report, "localised and variable recruitment, training, and salary practices resulted from the fragmentation of FSA." Children were employed in armed conflicts to fight, tend to the injured, or record events for propaganda.

2. Torture, Kidnappings and Executions:

On March 20, 2012, Human Rights Watch sent an open letter to the opposition, which included the FSA, accusing them of carrying out executions, torture, and kidnappings and urging them to stop these illegal activities. The also asked the opposition forces to respect the provisions and laws of IHL.[24]

Since the commencement of the civil conflict, war crimes in Syria have been documented by the "Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic," which is funded by the United Nations. Although rebel war crimes "did not reach the gravity, frequency and scale" of those committed by state forces, it was stated that they had nonetheless been committed.[25]

3. Use of Captives as Human Shields:

On 1st November, 2015 a video was posted online, which showed Jaysh al-Islam militants (opposition militant group) have locked people in around 100 cages and these cages contained around 7 people. These cages were put on various locations of northeast Damascus and parts of Eastern Ghouta. The group claimed that they were using these people as human shields in order to protect them from the airstrikes of the government forces.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reports that the individuals in cages acting as human shields were taken captive two years ago outside of Adra al-Ummaliyah, an Eastern Ghouta area controlled by the regime, together with their relatives, who were Alawite military personnel.[26]

4. Shelling of Civilian Areas:

An Amnesty International study from May 2016 states that between February and April 2016, Islamist rebel factions shelled Sheikh Maqoud randomly, killing at least 83 civilians including 30 children and injuring over 700 more. The regional director of Amnesty International proposed that these ongoing acts of indiscriminate violence be classified as war crimes.[27]

Human Rights Violation by Islamic State

Amnesty International has accused ISIL of carrying out extensive ethnic and religious minority group cleansing in northern Iraq. ISIL has "systematically targeted non-Arab and non-Sunni Muslim communities, killing or abducting hundreds, possibly thousands of people, and forcing more than 830,000 others to flee the areas it has captured since 10 June 2014," according to a special report published by Amnesty International in late 2014. The Turkmen Shia, Shabak Shia, Yazidis, Kaka'I, Assyrian Christians, and Sabeen Mandean are among those who have coexisted for millennia in Nineveh province, a significant portion of which was ruled by the Islamic State at the time.[28]

Human Rights Violation by Hezbollah

Hezbollah is a Shia political party and militant group in Lebanon which supports the regime of Dictator Assad. Hezbollah is considered as a terrorist organization by most of the countries in the world. Hezbollah is alleged for killing of Sunni civilians in Syria. Several videos posted on Internet shows Hezbollah fighters killing civilians in Syria. Hezbollah is also considered to be responsible for shelling civilian areas.

Human Rights Violation by Foreign State Actors

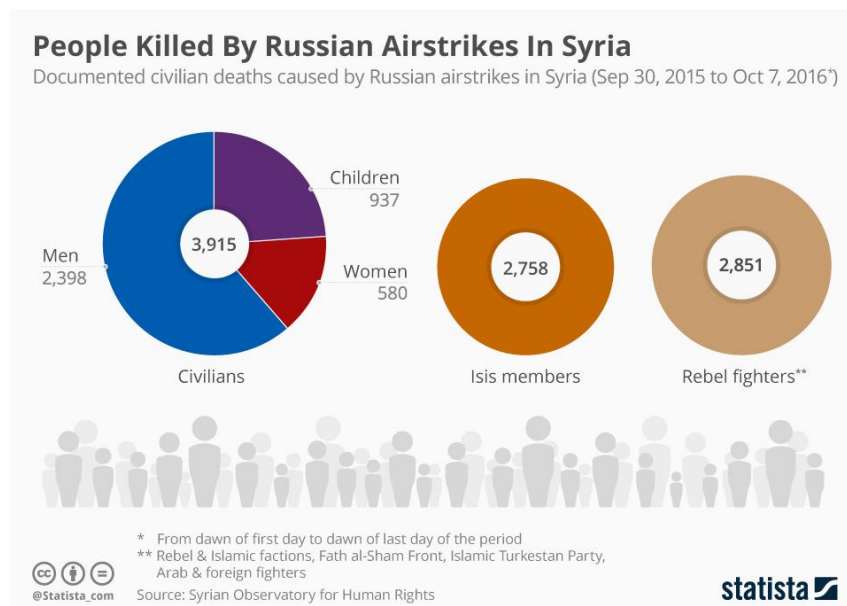
The Syrian conflict has evolved into a highly intricate scenario, with the involvement of several global superpowers in either direct or indirect capacities. This multifaceted engagement manifests in distinct alignments, with certain nations

offering support to the Syrian regime, while others extend backing to opposition factions. Amidst these dynamic, notable actors such as Russia, Iran, and the USA have played direct roles, thereby implicating themselves in allegations of perpetrating diverse human rights transgressions. They are discussed below.

1. Russia:

Russia has been alleged to be responsible for multiple war crimes and human rights violations during the war. Russian war crimes include

- The indiscriminate bombing of healthcare facilities throughout opposition held areas.[29]
- The use of illegal cluster munitions in rebel held areas which is in violation of United Nations resolution 2139 of 22 February 2014.[30]
- The use of banned white phosphorus against civilians of Idlib and Raqqa provinces.[31]
- Causing the death and injury to thousands of innocent civilians including children.[32]
- Indiscriminate air raids on civilian areas.[33]

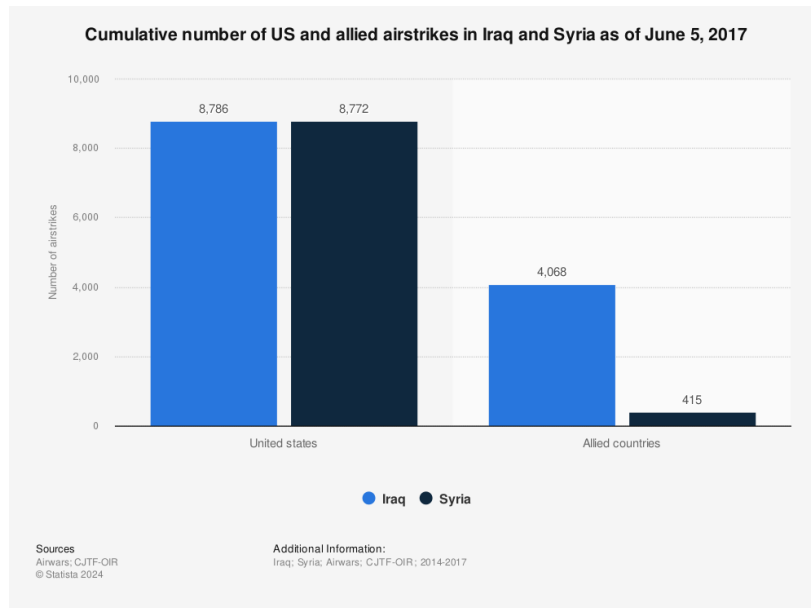


2. Iran:

From the beginning of the conflict, Iran was very much involved. Iran has a history of backing Shia regimes in the region. Iran wants to create its own dominance in the middle east and for that Syrian dictator stands as a promising aide. So, the government of Iran has been backing the Syrian dictator's regime. Iran has been alleged to be responsible for causing sectarian violence in Syria, sending its soldiers to Syria, recruiting child soldiers as volunteers to fight alongside Syrian Army and also funding the Shia battalions from Lebanon, Afghanistan and Iraq.[34] Iran is also accused for funding and supplying weapons to terrorist organization like Hezbollah and other Shia militias.

3. United States of America:

USA has a history of committing human rights violations and Syria is no exception. USA has been alleged to be responsible for a lot of civilian deaths in areas under ISIL control.[35] It is believed that USA aircrafts had bombarded the areas under ISIL control and has also targeted hospitals and medical staff. It is believed that at least 800 civilians have lost their lives due to USA airstrikes. Some organizations claim the figure of civilian deaths caused by USA to be as high as 6000.[36] The indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas have put a question mark on USA's commitment to international humanitarian laws and human right laws.



Impact of War on Syria's Economy

The Syria Civil had had a devastating impact on Syria's economy. It has created multifaceted problems which includes destruction of the country's infrastructure, loss of human capital and problems in the field of agriculture and oil production. The economy of Syria before war was running smoothly. The economy was diverse with oil, agriculture, tourism and infrastructure were contributing significantly in the GDP. However, the things completely reversed after the starting of this brutal war.

First, Syria's infrastructure has been completely destroyed by the war. Homes, schools, hospitals, highways, and factories have all been damaged by ongoing bombings and shelling. In 2017, the World Bank calculated that the conflict had resulted in cumulative GDP losses of \$226 billion. International sanctions and persistent conflict complicate reconstruction efforts and impede economic development.[37]

Second, human capital has taken a huge hit. Almost half of the population has been displaced due to the violence, with millions of people either fleeing as refugees or becoming internally displaced. The fighting has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. This displacement weakens the trained workforce necessary for economic progress by upsetting labour markets and educational institutions. According to UN estimates, almost 80 percent of people live in poverty, reflecting a sharp increase in poverty rates.

Thirdly, economic activity has been seriously interrupted by the war. Due to the devastation of irrigation systems, land mines, and farmer displacement, agricultural production has drastically decreased. Lack of raw materials, lost markets, and damaged infrastructure have all contributed to the collapse of industrial production. In addition, the war has exacerbated the humanitarian catastrophe by causing widespread inflation, currency depreciation, and a breakdown in public services.

Last but not least, the economy has been further damaged by international sanctions against the dictator's regime. These sanctions impede Syria's capacity to participate in global trade and get foreign investments by focusing on important industries including banking, trade, and oil.

Conclusion

From the above, it is clear that the conflict in Syria has almost destroyed this beautiful country. Almost 80% of the country has become refugee, some within the country and others outside the country. Millions of people have left their own country and they are living in the bordering states, i.e. Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, etc. Some of them tried to reach European countries. The fortunate refugees reached their destination and unfortunate died during flight. In this way the Syrian crisis has left millions of refugees and these refugees are living in a pathetic condition. Their human rights are being violated every day, although the neighbouring countries especially Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and many European countries are trying their best to support them but there is a limit of support to the refugees. This is a

humanitarian crisis which we are witnessing today due to the dictator Bashar Al-Assad and his main allies Russia, Iran, Iraq and Hezbollah.

Officially about 5lac people have been killed in this crisis. Majority of them are innocent whether they are Sunnis or Shias but since Sunnis comprise of about 80% of the population, they are the worst sufferers. Beautiful cities, hospitals, colleges and the residential areas have been destroyed completely. They are in rubbles. Worst ever atrocities have been committed on men, women and children. This happened only due to the weakness of United Nations and big powers. United Nations passed resolutions but never tried to implement it. Security Council also failed to perform its duty of maintaining peace and security throughout the world. Due to the VETO power enjoyed by five super powers many times resolutions could not be passed and it gave free hand to Assad regime and its allies to commit worst ever crime against humanity in 21st century. Big nations who are apparently opposed to Assad's regime paid only lip service and never tried seriously to stop Assad from committing grave human rights violations in Syria. President Obama was very lenient against Alawite regime. The next American President is a bit harsher towards Syrian dictator but accept one attack on military airport from which chemical weapons were used Trump has not done any military intervention which could weaken the regime. The Biden administration has maintained a status co on Syrian policies. Most of the Arab states are helping financially helping to the affected population and armed opposition groups, but they failed to send their armies and military like Iran, Russia and Hezbollah. Turkey tried to help the beleaguered population financially and morally but avoided military intervention due to many reasons. All these contributed in the killing of civilian population and human rights violations in Syria.

To conclude the whole discussion, it can be safely said that due to the failure of United Nations and big military powers helpless Syrians are suffering and there is no one to save them from the brutalities of Syrian dictator and his militias. Nobody knows how long these violations will go on.

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