

Syria

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Syria received a downward trend arrow due to worsening religious persecution, weakening of civil society groups and rule of law, and the large-scale starvation and torture of civilians and detainees.

The civil war that started in the wake of a peaceful 2011 uprising continued unabated in 2014. By April it had produced more than 190,000 fatalities and displaced more than 6.5 million people within Syria, according to the United Nations. As of September 2014, more than 3 million Syrians were registered as refugees.

While the Syrian regime appeared in danger of collapse in early 2013, it survived and even made some substantial territorial gains during 2014. Bashar al-Assad was reelected for a third presidential term in a vote that was widely seen as illegitimate by domestic and international opponents. Assad appeared to enjoy active or passive support among constituencies including Alawites, Christians, and Druze in the context of rising Sunni jihadist militancy, as well as steadfast assistance from Russia, Iran, the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah, and Shiite militias from Iraq—with the latter two participating directly in combat.

Human rights violations by the regime escalated as it besieged major population centers held by opposition forces in what amounted to a “surrender or starve” strategy, causing malnutrition and civilian deaths. The government continued to obstruct international efforts to aid affected populations, in violation of a UN Security Council resolution passed in February. A Syrian defector revealed evidence implicating the regime in the torture and starvation of thousands of prisoners. In addition to a large-scale chemical weapons attack on opposition-held territory in August 2013 that killed hundreds, a fact-finding mission for the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons determined that the regime had very likely used chemical weapons during 2014.

Insurgent groups also committed serious human rights violations, though the United Nations reported that these were dwarfed by the regime’s abuses. Rebel atrocities included detention, torture, and execution of perceived dissidents and rivals, and sectarian killings of civilians. The worst insurgent violators were jihadist militants, who further consolidated their control of territory and population centers in 2014. The United States and allied countries began a bombing campaign against the Islamic State (IS) militant group in September.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: -3 / 40 (-1) [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 0 / 12

Bashar al-Assad assumed power after the death of his father, longtime president Hafez al-Assad, in 2000. Constitutional revisions adopted in 2012 provided for future presidential elections, replacing a presidential referendum system in which the sole candidate was nominated by the ruling Baath Party. However, among other restrictions, candidates needed support from at least 35 lawmakers to qualify.

Assad was reelected for a third term in June 2014 with what the government claimed was 88.7 percent of the vote amid 73.4 percent turnout. The voting was conducted only in government-controlled areas and in a climate of severe repression. Observers were invited from friendly authoritarian countries including North Korea, while major democratic states denounced the voting as illegitimate.

Members of the 250-seat, unicameral People's Council serve four-year terms but hold little independent legislative power. Almost all power rests in the executive branch. The last legislative elections were held in May 2012 amid open warfare and an opposition boycott. The Baath Party and allied factions took 168 seats, progovernment independents secured 77, and a nominal opposition group won 5. Regardless of the formal electoral laws and processes the regime monitors, intimidates, and represses political dissidents, making it all but impossible for a genuine opposition to contest elections.

Opposition-held Syria continued to lack an effective or unified governing structure in 2014. The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, or Etilaf, was formed in 2012 to act as the international representative body of the revolution. Comprised of delegates from opposition groups in exile, it has been recognized as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people by the Arab League, the United States, and many European countries. Etilaf has undergone several changes of leadership through internal elections; in July 2014, delegates meeting in Istanbul chose Hadi al-Bahra, a businessman with ties to Saudi Arabia, as president. These elections are competitive to an extent, but heavily influenced by the coalition's foreign backers. Moreover, Etilaf's links to local leaders and fighters inside Syria remain tenuous, casting serious doubt on the degree to which it is genuinely representative of civilians or fighters in the country.

Provisional local councils in certain rebel-held areas have organized rudimentary elections, and some appear to have been fairly contested and even impartially monitored. However, such experiments in civilian self-government remain vulnerable to derailment by hostile insurgent groups, constant bombardment and occasional siege by regime forces, and chronic resource shortages.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 0 / 16

Formally, the state forbids parties based on religious, tribal, or regional affiliation. Until a 2011 decree allowed the formation of new parties, the only legal factions were the Baath Party and its several small coalition partners. Independent candidates are heavily vetted and closely allied with the regime. The 2012 constitutional reforms relaxed rules regarding the

participation of non-Baathist parties, but the government maintains a powerful intelligence and security apparatus to monitor and punish opposition political activity in practice.

Within the progovernment camp, politics and decision making are completely dominated by Assad, his extended family, and a close circle of business and security allies. The president's relatives control key elements of the security forces. Although the government is often described as an Alawite regime and a protector of religious minorities, it is not an authentic vehicle for these groups' political interests. Political access is a function not of sect, but of proximity and loyalty to Assad and his associates. The political elite is not exclusively Alawite and indeed includes members of the majority Sunni sect, which also makes up most of the rebel movement; meanwhile, Alawites, Christians, and Druze outside Assad's inner circle are just as politically disenfranchised as the broader Sunni population. Foreign actors including Iran, Hezbollah, and Iraqi Shiite militias also exert heavy influence over the regime due to their critical contribution to the war effort.

Political activity in rebel-held areas is more vigorous than in regime areas, but it is still seriously constrained, and in some places nonexistent. Civilians' political aspirations are often subordinated to whatever armed group controls a given area. Opposition territory is divided among a multitude of armed factions, including moderate, Islamist, radical jihadist, and autonomous Kurdish units, with varying implications for local political life. Local councils are often sponsored or appointed by prominent families and armed groups, and overwhelmed by addressing humanitarian needs and delivering basic services. They must also contend with the rising power of jihadist groups including Jabhat al-Nusra and IS, the latter of which tolerates no political activity. Nevertheless, even this limited level of local political participation is nearly unprecedented in Syria, made possible by the collapse of regime authority and the decentralized politics of many opposition-held areas.

C. Functioning of Government: 0 / 12

Government institutions lacked public accountability and were plagued by corruption even before the armed conflict. Those who question state policies or actions face harassment, censorship, imprisonment, or death. Members of the ruling family and their inner circle are said to own and control much of the Syrian economy. The president's personal fortune has been estimated at between \$550 million and \$1.5 billion; his cousin Rami Makhoul is said to be worth \$5 billion. Makhoul was designated as profiting from public corruption by the U.S. Treasury Department in 2008. Syria was ranked 159 out of 175 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The government's lack of public accountability has been exacerbated during the civil war by the rise of militias that are nominally loyal to the regime but increasingly autonomous and free to exploit the population in regime-held areas. They have reportedly engaged in abuses including looting, extortion, and the erection of arbitrary checkpoints.

Corruption is also widespread in rebel-held areas. Some rebel commanders, including from brigades nominally aligned with democratic powers and their allies, have been accused of

looting, extortion, and theft. In addition, local administrators and activists complain that little of the international aid reportedly given to opposition representatives abroad seems to reach them, raising suspicions of graft. Islamist factions appear somewhat more disciplined and eager to enforce their decrees, though militant groups such as IS are not accountable to the public. IS runs an extensive extortion network and smuggling operations that extend into Iraq and Turkey.

Discretionary Political Rights Question B: -3 / 0 (-1)

The armed conflict has grown increasingly sectarian, with Sunni civilians bearing the brunt of government and progovernment militia attacks, some Islamist factions persecuting minorities and secularists, and civilians of all confessions seeking safety among their respective groups. The result is significant, ongoing change in the country's demographics. The situation worsened in 2014, as IS militants seized and consolidated control over substantial territory in the provinces of Raqqa, Deir al-Zour, and Aleppo, implementing harsh, discriminatory, and frequently violent policies against non-Sunni Muslims as well as Sunnis perceived as erring in their faith.

Civil Liberties: 2 / 60 (-1)

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 2 / 16 (+1)

The constitution nominally guarantees freedom of speech and the press, but this is not implemented in practice. Freedom of expression is heavily restricted. Most domestic news outlets are controlled by either the regime or rebel factions, and the regime in particular substantially hinders access to information. All media are required to obtain permission to operate from the Interior Ministry. The state controls major newspapers, while private media in government areas are generally owned by figures closely associated with the regime. The state has stopped trying to block Facebook but instead uses it for surveillance, monitoring the pages of opponents and dissidents. Meanwhile, the progovernment Syrian Electronic Army has mounted a series of cyberattacks on opposition supporters, activists, and news outlets, including major foreign media.

At least 17 journalists were killed in Syria in 2014, the majority of whom were Syrian. IS executed two American freelance journalists who had been held in prolonged captivity. According to Reporters Without Borders, as of September at least 19 journalists had disappeared since the beginning of the uprising. Many others have been kidnapped or imprisoned but eventually released.

While the constitution mandates that the president be a Muslim, there is no state religion, and the regime has generally allowed freedom of worship as long as religious activities do not spill over into the political sphere. The government tightly monitors mosques and controls the appointment of Muslim religious leaders. In opposition areas, freedom of worship also generally prevails, except in territory controlled by jihadist groups. IS, for

example, has destroyed several religious and cultural sites and artifacts. It has implemented harsh restrictions on any religious activity that does not conform to its version of Sunni Islam. The war has increased sectarian hostility and polarization in both government and rebel-held areas. The regime has carried out massacres of Sunni civilians, while Alawite civilians have been killed by radical Islamists.

Academic freedom is heavily restricted. University professors in government-held areas have been dismissed or imprisoned for expressing dissent, and some have been killed in response to their outspoken support for regime opponents. Education in general has been greatly disrupted by the civil war, with school facilities regularly attacked or commandeered by combatants on all sides. IS has reconstituted an educational system of sorts in some of its territory, though it is based on religious and political indoctrination. Schooling in regime areas continues to emphasize political indoctrination as well.

Private discussion is subject to heavy surveillance and punishment in areas controlled by the government and the more extreme insurgent groups, but the environment is somewhat more open than before the uprising in some rebel-held districts.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 0 / 12

Freedom of assembly is severely restricted. Opposition protests in government-held areas are usually met with gunfire, mass arrests, and torture of those detained. The regime generally denies registration to nongovernmental organizations with reformist or human rights missions, and regularly conducts raids and searches to detain civic and political activists. Some rebel factions, especially IS, have also severely repressed civilian demonstrations. In September 2014, IS fighters reportedly shot at protesters, calling on them to leave their town in Deir al-Zour following deadly government airstrikes, and executed one civilian.

An umbrella group of grassroots activists known as the Local Coordination Committees (LCC) emerged in many parts of Syria at the time of the 2011 uprising, organizing and monitoring the activities of the peaceful protest movement and documenting human rights abuses. However, LCC figures and other activists have faced violence and intimidation by armed groups.

Professional syndicates in state-held areas are controlled by the Baath Party, and all labor unions must belong to the General Federation of Trade Unions, a nominally independent grouping that the government uses to control union activity. The economic and political pressures of the war have made functioning labor relations virtually impossible across the country.

F. Rule of Law: 0 / 16

The constitution forbids government interference in the civil judiciary, but all judges and prosecutors must belong to the Baath Party and are in practice beholden to the political leadership. Military officers can try civilians in both conventional military courts and field courts. While civilians may appeal military court decisions with the military chamber of the Court of Cassation, military judges are neither independent nor impartial, as they are subordinate to the military command.

Government forces are responsible for the arrest and torture of tens of thousands of people since the uprising began in 2011. In 2014, a newly revealed archive of some 55,000 images—compiled by a military police photographer who defected from the regime—documented the torture and starvation of prisoners on a massive scale. Human Rights Watch in 2012 identified 27 facilities where people have been subjected to more than 20 types of torture, including beatings, torture with electricity or battery acid, rape, and mock execution. Most victims are men between 18 and 35 years of age, but women, the elderly, and children are also detained and tortured. Rape is being used as an instrument of war, and while most reported victims are women, men and boys have also been raped. Human rights groups report that the overwhelming majority of documented sexual assaults in Syria are perpetrated by government forces and their allies.

Insurgent groups have been accused of committing summary executions, including of civilians, and torturing and mutilating captured combatants. Some Islamist rebels and jihadists have also set up religious courts in their areas, imposing harsh punishments for perceived religious offenses by civilians. More generally, the breakdown of state authority and the proliferation of both loyalist and rebel militias has led to warlordism, crime, and arbitrary exercise of authority.

The Kurdish minority has historically faced official discrimination and severe restrictions on work, travel, property ownership, and cultural and linguistic expression, though their situation somewhat improved after 2011 due to receding government authority in Kurdish areas. Syrian law also discriminates against LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people; according to the 1949 penal code, “unnatural sexual intercourse” is punishable with up to three years in prison, and gay men are subjected to targeted forms of sexual abuse. They are also persecuted by extremist groups in insurgent areas.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 0 / 16 (-2)

The proliferation of military and rebel checkpoints, heavy combat, and general insecurity have severely restricted the free movement of people and vital supplies since 2011, affecting resident civilians, the internally displaced, and those attempting to flee the country. The regime has systematically blockaded regions controlled by rebels, with especially tight cordons surrounding districts under military siege or assault. Rebel and jihadist forces have also intermittently blocked and confiscated shipments of aid and medicine for civilians.

Rampant corruption predated the Syrian uprising, affecting the daily lives of Syrians. Citizens are frequently required to bribe officials to complete procedures, and business

investors and owners must often pay bribes to operate. Since the war broke out, Syrians who fear persecution have been wary of approaching official institutions to request critical documentation, and must resort to the black market. Rebel groups also extort businesses and confiscate private property.

Women are underrepresented in Syrian politics and government, and face serious legal discrimination. They hold just 12 percent of the seats in the legislature, though some have been appointed to senior positions, including one of the two vice presidential posts. Husbands may prevent their wives from leaving the country with their children, and women cannot pass citizenship on to their children. Women are not able to organize independently to advocate for gender equality. Male perpetrators of killings classified as “honor crimes” can receive reduced sentences under the penal code. Personal status law for Muslims is governed by Sharia (Islamic law) and is discriminatory in marriage, divorce, and inheritance matters. Church law governs personal status issues for Christians, in some cases barring divorce.

Syria was ranked 139 out of 142 countries in the World Economic Forum’s 2014 *Global Gender Gap Report*. In addition to sexual violence associated with the armed conflict, domestic abuse is endemic. Rates of early marriage are reportedly high, with displaced and refugee families in particular marrying off young daughters as a perceived safeguard against rape, a means of covering up such crimes, or a response to economic pressure. Forced prostitution and human trafficking are also serious problems among these populations.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology