

# FACTORS INVOLVED IN OUTBREAK OF CIVIL WAR IN SYRIA – IN MARCH 2011

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## **Abstract**

*This article was written as part of my doctoral research on the topic of **Conflict of Loyalties: Relationships between Druze in Israel and Druze in Syria during the Syrian Civil War between 2011-2017.***

*In this article I will analyze the factors involved in the outbreak of the civil war in the context of the conflict of loyalties among the Druze population living in Syria. The article will show the political and geopolitical background to the civil war outbreak.*

**Keywords:** *Druze, Civil war, Israel, Syria, Syrian war.*

As many as the reasons for the Syrian War, there was only one outcome, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. In an investigative article published by the Center in June 2021, half a million people had been killed in this war, there were more than 5.5 million refugees registered in neighboring or other countries, and there were 6.7 million displaced people in more than 130 countries<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, the war, which had continued for more than a decade, left Syria drained and destroyed socially, economically and politically.

Looking broadly at the prevailing economic, social and political situation in Syria following the outbreak of war, one can clearly see a country marching into the abyss. The Syrian regime as well as most countries in the region, including the superpowers failed to appreciate the scale of Syrian civilians' distress and did not expect its political and economic stagnation to lead thousands onto the street and shout of regime change. Additionally, the wave of

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<sup>1</sup> France 24. *Half a million dead in the Syrian war in more than a decade* (2021) (03/05/2022)

demonstrations that swept many countries in the Middle East and led young Syrians to break through their fear barrier of Syrian security apparatuses to unify as one against the regime.

In this article I will identify those factors that contributed to the outbreak of war in Syria. The article will also address existing economic, political and social phenomena and circumstances in the Syrian state on the eve of the outbreak of war, including social, economic and political ramifications.

Firstly, countries in the region and the international community did not foresee that 8 March 2011 would be a critical day in the lives of a number of Middle Eastern countries and the superpowers. On that date, after Friday prayers, thousands of Syrians demonstrated and protested in a number of cities, including Baniyas and Aleppo, shouting slogans calling for reforms and freedom. The largest number of protesters was seen in the city of Daraa, who also shouted slogans whose purpose was to achieve freedom and reforms. However, this scene of protests quickly became a violent battle arena between protesters and the Syrian security forces, with two people killed on the first day and three the following day<sup>2</sup>.

At first, protests in Syrian cities were local, limited and without violence, and were not Islamist by nature, but very quickly they became a bloody civil war<sup>3</sup>.

Zisser stated that the demonstrations that began in Syria in 2011, were part of the wave of demonstrations flooding a number of Middle Eastern Arab states, starting in Tunisia, followed by Egypt, Libya and Yemen. These demonstrations were called the "Arab Spring". Zisser maintained that initially the assessment was that this demonstration would not spread to Syria for a number of reasons.

1. Syrian society is made up of a number of ethnic groups, 40% belong to minorities such as Alawites, Christians, Druze and Kurds, who strove to preserve regime stability because of their fear of radical Islamic factors who were likely to take over<sup>4</sup>.

2. For 20 years Syria had suffered from economic distress and many social problems, although the regime did not think that these problems were likely to lead to a revolt, as happened in Egypt.

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<sup>2</sup> Fouad Ajami, *The Syrian Revolt*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2013, p. 72.

<sup>3</sup> Eyal Zisser, "Roots of the War in Syria" in *Maarachot*, special issue, (In Hebrew). 2020, p7.

<sup>4</sup> Eyal Zisser, *Faces of Syria: Regime, Society and State*, Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2003, p.72.

3. Syria is a country closed to the outside world, and its development was slow and limited. Additionally, the more its regime strengthened, the more intense was its oppression of its people.

4. The Syrian president was a young man when he took over power, in contrast to the presidents of Egypt of Yemen or Libya who were older rulers and has been in power for a long time.<sup>5</sup>

In spite of this, the match of revolt was lit in Syria and surprised the regime and its government.

### ECONOMIC SITUATION

From independence in 1946 to the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in 2011, the Syrian economy witnessed ups and downs. In some decades, the economy enjoyed relatively high positive rates, while in others there were drastic falls.

The period of the United Arab Republic between Syria and Egypt established at the end of the 1950s was the preface to later periods in terms of expanding trade and increasing exports. The government produced a series of legislation and laws following the adoption of a socialist economic system, laws needed to develop the Syrian economy and strengthen the influence of the public sector, such as the agrarian reform law, regularizing agricultural relationships, nationalizing companies and factories, foreign exchange regulations. These reforms were completed during the 1960s<sup>6</sup>.

After Hafez al-Assad rose to power in 1970, he implemented a new economic program titled "Economic Pluralism", for the purposes of social welfare<sup>7</sup>. This must be added to funds he received from Arab states after the October 1973 war. The Syrian economy was based on agriculture, industry, and other branches, which led to economic growth during the 1970s and positively affected social li

During this period the state established control over the public sector and important economic chains, including foreign and wholesale trade, established industrial initiatives, completed infrastructure projects, and showed an interest

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<sup>5</sup> Joshua Stacher, *Adaptable Autocrats, Regime Power in Egypt and Syria*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012, pp 33-45.

<sup>6</sup> Abeer Atera, "Reorganization of Syrian Economy and its implications for entering the world Trade Organization". MA dissertation. Damascus University, Syria (In Arabic), 2007, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> Moner El-hamsh, Socio-Economic Perspective on Syrian protest movement, Attitudes and Interpretations. *El-mustaqbal el-arabi magazine*, no. 397, 2012. (In Arabic), p.162

in the agricultural export industry and oil, which from 1969 stood at 590 barrels per day. These economic initiatives were expected to produce results from the early 1980s<sup>8</sup>.

In the 1980s, the Syrian economy began to suffer from a deep crisis as a result of the fall in the price of oil, which led to less workplaces and increased deficit rate in the general budget. Additionally, American sanctions imposed on Syria because of its support of terrorism, led to the state failing to fulfil its obligations to its citizens, which allowed the private sector to take the state's place in many areas such as export and import etc. This led to the growth of a new status of businesspeople and local investors<sup>9</sup>.

At the start of the 1990s with the collapse of socialist economic policy and introduction of an open economic policy and help from Gulf states as a result of Syria's status in relation to the Gulf War had a positive effect on the atmosphere in Syria until the end of the century, which led to solving the economic crisis and increased growth rates.

With the rise of President Bashar al-Assad to power, Syria suffered from renewed economic distress that led to an absence of workplaces for young people at increase of about 16.9% in unemployment rates<sup>10</sup>. The president began to work on a new economic program to adapt to the current situation. Two streams appeared at this point, each of which had its own perception of the economic change process. The first is called the development stream. This stream saw a need in retaining the public sector and carrying out reforms by separating ownership and management, so that it would compete effectively with the private sector. In contrast was another stream most of whose members came from the bureaucratic bourgeoisie, who had benefitted from huge state corruptions, and was indifferent to the idea of reforming the public sector which led to a social market policy characterized by relative openness, changing strategic aims of the market management process compared to socialist management. Additionally, the economic program aspired to reintegrate the poor into the development process and improve the level of social services. The program also encouraged large investors to join to achieve partnership between

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<sup>8</sup> Moner El-hamsh, Socio-Economic Perspective on Syrian protest movement, Attitudes and Interpretations. *El-mustaqbal el-arabi magazine*, no. 397, 2012. (In Arabic), p.163

<sup>9</sup> Peretz Folker, "Syrian economy under the Assad regime", translating to Arabic Abed El-karem Mahfod, London: Ryad elraes, 2012, pp. 118-119

<sup>10</sup> Jamal Parrot, *The last decade in the history of Syria – stagnation and reforms*, Doha: Arab Center for Policy Research, 2012. (In Arabic) p. 31

the government and private sector (ibid). This economic program gave rise to capitalists who signed an agreement with the regime such as the Assad, Makhoulf and other families. This program focused on service branches with fast profits and ignored investments in the fields of agriculture and industry. Hence, this class-controlled Syria's orientation, and this led to a decline in the status of the public sector and damaged the middle classes leading to a growth in poverty rates especially in rural regions<sup>11</sup>.

## **SOCIAL SITUATION**

Syrian society constitutes a complex mosaic of diverse ethnic groups both in a religious and ethnic sense. The Syrian regime attempted over the years to take on a secular structure and appear as if it protected minorities and balanced society's components to establish its complete control over society. Before the crisis that began in 2011, Syria's population was 25 million people, of whom 70% were Muslim.

### **Alawites**

Alawites make up 11% of Syrian citizens and are concentrated in the western region in the Hamez and Hama regions<sup>12</sup>. Alawites have joined the army since the French conquest of Syria to achieve better lives than those who relied on agriculture and industry.

In the early 1990s Alawites began to migrate in their multitudes to cities because of the special relationship they received from the regime especially after the 1970 revolt<sup>13</sup>.

### **Kurds**

Kurds constitute 8% of Syria's population and are concentrated in north-eastern regions bordering on Iraq and Turkey. After the Barzani revolt in Iraq, Kurds began to demand cultural and national rights, and thus the Kurdish problem became more and more complicated following the Baath party's coming to power and its proclamations damaging their fundamental rights such as language and citizenship.

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<sup>11</sup> Moner El-hamsh, Socio-Economic Perspective on Syrian protest movement, Attitudes and Interpretations. *El-mustaqbal el-arabi magazine*, no. 397, 2012. (In Arabic), p.166

<sup>12</sup> Nabil Marzouk. *Unemployment in Syria – Causes and approaches to treatment*. Symposium, third day No. 14, Science Association. 2001. [http://www.mafhoum.com/syr/articles\\_01/nabil/nabil](http://www.mafhoum.com/syr/articles_01/nabil/nabil)

<sup>13</sup> Alghoraba website, *The religious map inside Syria*. 2018. <http://www.alghoraba.com/index.php/2015-12-26-10-56-18/222-2018-04-03-05-48-20>

The Syrian regime, especially during the period of President Hafez al-Assad, as well as that of Bashar al-Assad, oppressed Kurdish society because of its desire to realize their demands for independence and political and cultural rights on the pretext that the region is not connected geographically to Kurdistan.

### **Druze**

Arab ideology and “national unity” were nurtured by Syria after independence in 1946. The first step taken by the government was to annul ethnic representation in parliament. Additionally, the Syrian state allowed a large number of Druze officers to hold key positions in the Syrian army.

After the Ba’ath revolution in 1966, Druze were integrated into political and public life through party institutions and thanks to their relationships with the ruling elite in Damascus.

Today, most the Druze population in Syria lives in the Jabal al-Druze (Mountain of the Druze) region, in which the central city is Suwayda. In addition to Jabal al-Druze, the Druze live in two additional central regions, the Northern Golan Heights, and outskirts of Damascus.

Relations between the Syrian regime and the Druze were stabilized when Hafez al-Assad took power. He saw the Druze and the other minorities as a base for his regime. During his reign, and that of his son’s (Bashar al-Assad) reign until the Civil War, the Druze enjoyed privileges from the regime in distribution of budgets and appointments to military and civil service.

During the Civil War, the Druze in Suwayda did not fight against the regime, but also did not express support of it. However, in 2015, a significant development occurred, which caused a crisis of trust between the Druze and Assad regime: when ISIS forces threatened to conquer Suwayda, inferior government forces in the region, withdrew from the Suwayda region and left the Druze with no significant defense force.

In March 2011, the Arab Spring reached Syria as well. A farmers’ protest in southern Syria, arising from social and economic distress, turned into a broad popular insurrection against Bashar al-Assad’s regime, and soon after into a bloody, indecisive civil war. As time passed, the struggle in Syria gained an ethnic character, and worse – a religious character of holy war – of Islamic groups from Syria itself and volunteers who streamed into the country from the entire Arab and Islamic world, against the Alawite heretic regime ruling Damascus, which is an ally of the Shiite faction in the Middle East, led by Iran and Hezbollah.

### Other Minorities

Christians constitute 4.7% of Syrian society, Ishmaelites 1.5% and Turkmen 3%.

President Hafez al-Assad was aware of the sensitivity of the makeup of Syrian society, and therefore, he strove to build loyalties in different ways against future leaders to preserve the regime and its institutions<sup>14</sup>. Therefore, he appointed Alawites to the most influential roles in the army while reserving other roles for Sunnis. In addition, he placed most party and ethnic group positions in the hands of the Sunni to placate them and benefit from the strong Sunni basis to strengthen the regime<sup>15</sup>. Assad's strategy succeeded in the early years of his rule, although a phenomenon of "Alawitation" quickly spread to influential institutions in the country, which increased the Sunni society's hatred for this class.

When Bashar al-Assad acquired was nominated Syrian president, as his father's heir and in the shadow of a difficult social environment, political stagnation was created together with a situation of security stability in which a political monopoly was created and political liberties were pushed aside in favor of an economic policy matching business people's interests. This negatively affected the poor and made matters worse. And in light of institutions failing to pass on civilians' demands to the Syrian government, streets became the only means of protesting against the tragic reality<sup>16</sup>.

Following the Corrective Movement's coup in 1970, the Syrian state entered a new era under the leadership of Hafez al-Assad. Al-Assad maintained that army rule was higher than that of the ruling Baath party, and the center of the party's weight was transferred to the president. Hence, he weakened the party and strengthened the rule of the military. President al-Assad acted to build a system for a regime that would match his aspirations, and in 1973 he created a constitution giving wide authority to the president expressed in his being secretary-general of the party and commander-general of the army and armed

<sup>14</sup> Jozef El-Daher, Ethnicity in Assad's regime in Syria. *Eltawra Eldaaemah*. No. 3, 2013. (In Arabic).

<sup>15</sup> Iyad Elsharege, *The Syrian Revolution and the Sunni-Alawite Struggle*, 2013, (03/05/2022) [https://orient-news.net/ar/news\\_show/6358](https://orient-news.net/ar/news_show/6358)

<sup>16</sup> Gasan Mofleh, *Syria, Iran and Bashar Al- Assad, Ethnicity in Politics*. World Arab website. 2014 <https://alossaily.wordpress.com/2014/06/04/%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%A8%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%81%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9>

forces, and thus was permitted to disperse the People's Council and appoint council members. In addition, the president serves as head of the executive authority and chair of the Supreme Judicial Council<sup>17</sup>.

President Hafez al-Assad succeeded in creating a hierarchical regime in which the bureaucracy has a role, which led to revoking competition and pluralism. In addition, he built a network of social and military interests rooted in the principle of complete loyalty to him, producing a regime under his complete control.

At the end of the 1990s, the president invested efforts in creating fundamental changes in the security and military establishment, to create an internal environment allowing him to transfer rule to his son Bashar al-Assad. Thus, he acted to prevent opposition and arranged Bashar al-Assad's climb up the ladder of army role to make the preparation process for the role of president easier<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, paragraph 83 of the constitution was amended reducing the president's age from 40 to 34 matching Bashar al-Assad's age. In addition, there was a total consensus that Bashar al-Assad would serve in the role of commander of the army and armed forces, secretary-general of the party and chairman of the Progressive and Political National Front, which would allow him to transfer rule to Bashar without any hurdles.

From his earliest days, president Bashar al-Assad was aware of the economic and social difficulties in his country, and therefore he instituted gradual reforms for all state suffering crises. First, he aspired that these reforms would include political openness to create a positive atmosphere within Syria, and he initiated a committee with the participation of national powers to encourage national and political dialogue<sup>19</sup>.

To strengthen his rule and calm acting parties, he permitted some of them to join the Progressive National Front and acted to reduce political hurdles and release some prisoners<sup>20</sup>. These reforms did not last long because the old-guard national leadership objected to political openness and responding to ideas of correction. With the failure of the reforms policy, the regime returned to a

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<sup>17</sup> Zoltan Branny, Armies' positions regarding revolutions, *Syaasat Arbiah Magazine*, No, 4, 2013. <https://siyasatarabiya.dohainstitute.org/ar/issue004/Pages/art10.aspx>

<sup>18</sup> Radwan Zyadih, *Regime and Intelligence in Syria*. London: Ryad elrees llkotob, 2013, Pp. 107-111

<sup>19</sup> Radwan Zyadih, *Regime and Intelligence in Syria*. London: Ryad elrees llkotob, 2013, P. 102

<sup>20</sup> Bashar Elakede, Political reforms in Syria. *Drassat Eklemiah*, 2009. (In Arabic) - <https://www.iasj.net/iasj/download/3b0164bb907b450b>



policy of oppression, on the pretext that Syrian society was not ready for democratic openness<sup>21</sup>.

He was of the opinion that the absence of fundamental freedoms and lessened importance of transition to democracy, both guaranteed political and economic stability, and prevented social shocks. He also believed that reform was not a burning need, in light of the fact that Syria was exposed to external dangers particularly after the events of September 2001<sup>22</sup>.

Despite his new way, national powers continued to demand reforms, and as a result a national opposing political union was formed that included the opposition political party holding ideological ideas of the liberal left, which demanded political pluralism under the rule of law. The regime stopped the leaders of this political activity and closed political forums. It also imposed means of restricting and prohibiting travel (abroad) among political activists<sup>23</sup>.

President Bashar Al-Assad acted slowly to correct political aspects, in contrast to the economic aspect. Likewise, his attempts at reform clashed with interested parties who delayed the reform process, fearing they threatened their political and economic interests. In addition, the president conducted a policy of repression against the national movement. Shutting down newspapers and forums, splits in the opposition and absence of coordinated plans delayed the reform process, which led to a retreat in the role of the opposition. Furthermore, the presidents' interest in external returns at the cost of internal returns, increased the anger of the middle classes opposing the political regime.

## CAUSES OF THE SYRIAN CRISIS

The crisis in Syria commenced as a result of an accumulation of various factors, some political and other economic and social. Mass protests began as a spontaneous reaction to a tense reality because of the stagnation in the political structure and methodical tyranny, with the purpose of bringing about a change in rule from tyrannical rule to a pluralistic state to guarantee justice and equality and realize the right of the minority to active political participation.

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<sup>21</sup> Azmi Bishara, *Development in American Position vis-à-vis the Syrian revolution*. Arab Center for Research, Eldoha, 2013. (In Arabic) <http://www.dohainstitute.org/release/dbc39132-41bd>

<sup>22</sup> Azmi Bishara, *Development in American Position vis-à-vis the Syrian revolution*. Arab Center for Research, Eldoha, 2013. (In Arabic) <http://www.dohainstitute.org/release/dbc39132-41bd>

<sup>23</sup> Nageb El-Gadban, *In the direction if change in Syria, why are Syrians angry?* Middle East Online. 2011. <http://www.middle-east-online.com/?id=>

### **1. Regime Totalitarianism**

The regime in Syria had become the sole lot of the president as a result of changes made to the constitution, and thus President Hafez al-Assad succeeded, throughout his rule to rule alone, and he imposed a sole regime in Syria relying on the army and security institutions. He also weakened the middle class by binding it in various security apparatus. This contributed to pushing political life into the margins and led to the spread of corruption and absence of a state of law guaranteeing freedom for all. He also took control of state institutions by combining all political parties, except for the Baath party, into the Progressive National Front.

### **2. Handing Down Rule**

The Syrian nation demanded the annulment of handing down rule and a fundamental change to the political way. President Hafez al-Assad dreamed of bequeathing rule to his son Bassel, but after he was killed, the president acted to hand down rule to his son Bashar by preparing him and giving him wide authority within the regime.

He did this by virtue of those protected by state security and his qualifications and being given broad authority and by devoting state control and mechanisms to solicit and make him president

Syrians hoped the son would be different from his father, but Bashar's appointment to president led to no changes in any areas<sup>24</sup>.

### **3. Absence of balance between authorities**

The executive authority's control of the legislature and lack of independence of the judicial authority were noticeable factors contributing to deepening the structural crisis of the political regime. This was because the president enjoys wide authorities as chairman of the ruling Baath party, which controls political life in the country. The president rules the executive and legislative authorities, as well as judicial authority he gets from law and the constitution.

### **4. Institutional Suffocation**

Over decades, political life has declined in Syrian society, many sectors of society have been pushed to the margins and have been forbidden from

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<sup>24</sup> Kamal Abo shawesh, *The January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution in Egypt: Causes and Implications for the Palestinian Issue*. Thesis. MA dissertation. Al-Azhar University, Palestine, 2013, p. 105

participating in economic and political life. Likewise, the absence of democracy and freedoms and security penetration into the lives of civilians together with the absence of election laws, were important factors in the creation of a society living under continuing political suffocation.

### **5. Emergency Laws and Regulations**

The Syrian nation demanded cancelling the emergency state that began after the Baath party took over government in March 1963. The president appointed members of the Baath party whom he trusted to important positions without examining their qualifications and turned security apparatus into guards and guardians of state institutions, which led to diminishing management abilities and incentivized corruption and breaking law and regulations.

### **6. Economic Situation**

Economic sectors suffered from administrative illnesses, which led to the withdrawal of the economic sector's functioning and reducing public spending, ending investments in government exports, and transferring this role to the public sector. As a result, poverty and unemployment grew and inflation rates increased mainly in rural regions (El-Taki, 2013). According to 2010 estimates, about 7 million Syrians (34.4%) lived below the poverty line. In addition, buying capability reduced about 28%, and hence Syria is divided into two sections: the first, a minority of people controlling state economic resources, and the second, the majority of the nation, suffering from poverty<sup>25</sup>.

### **7. Environmental Factors**

The terrible drought in Syria from 2006 to 2011 led to widespread harvest failures, increased food prices and mass migration of families living off agriculture to cities. This migration led to the destruction of fundamental structures which (also) collapsed under the weight of about a million and a half refugees from the Iraq war.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper presents a literature review analyzing the main geopolitical factors involved in the eruption of the civil war in Syria, in March 2011.

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<sup>25</sup> Jamal Parrot, *The last decade in the history of Syria – stagnation and reforms*, Doha: Arab Center for Policy Research, 2012. (In Arabic) p. 107

Arab Spring revolt in regions such as Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen influenced the Syrian nation in that it led them to breakdown the fear barrier, go out into the streets and demand reforms from the regime, mainly political and economic reforms to improve the daily lives.

Within two months these protests had turned into a bloody civil war, and Syria became a regional and international battle arena. The price of this war was heavy, millions of citizens lost their homes and thousands of families lost their loved ones on the journey to achieve their freedom. The war left Syria socially, politically and economically exhausted and pulverized.

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