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# SYRIAN LIVABILITY REPORT

IS IT POSSIBLE TO RETURN TO SYRIA?

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## SUMMARY

Civil war and conflicts that have been going on in Syria since 2011 have caused millions of people to be forcibly displaced and in need of humanitarian aid. Recently, decrease in conflict or airstrikes news coming from Syria due to other wars, conflicts and disasters occurring globally has led to a false perception that the situation in the country has stabilized.

This misperception, reflected in various media platforms and news bulletins, can also influence policy makers and decision-makers and cause public opinion to change regarding the situation in Syria, both in Turkey and in some European countries hosting Syrian refugees. Thus, discourses began to spread, such as that Syria, where conflicts have decreased, is now a livable place and that a suitable environment has been created

for people to return. However, when the whole of Syria is taken into consideration, it can be seen that the current political, social and economic conditions in the country are not suitable for an honorable life.

At this point, the safe zones created by Türkiye in Northern Syria are put forward as an example. Although the security provided by Türkiye in these regions provides a suitable environment at least to a certain extent in terms of the life safety of internally displaced people in the region, field data show that many parts of the country are far from being livable in terms of living conditions. In this case, the return of millions of Syrian refugees scattered across different countries will further aggravate the already unfavorable humanitarian situation and security environment in the region.

Considering the whole of Syria, it can be seen that the current political, social and economic conditions in the country are not suitable for an honorable life. There is still no security of life in Syrian cities outside the regions under Turkish control. This situation did not change the dangerous status of these regions for civilians trying to save their lives from the civil war. Regions under Turkish control are also the scene of attacks and infiltration attempts by SDF<sup>1</sup> militias. In addition, civilians in the region may be harmed due to occasional conflicts between other armed opposition groups in the region.

In addition to revealing the general humanitarian landscape in Syria, this report also examines whether the socioeconomic situation in the country is suitable for repatriations. In connection with this, the report questions the increase in returns, especially in Tür-

kiye and European countries, and the acceptance and return processes in these countries.

This report aims to reveal the humanitarian, socio-economic and political dimension of the civil war in Syria, which has been going on for approximately 13 years. It aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the dimensions of the humanitarian crisis in the country, as well as how Syria's divided structure and political instability, economic difficulties, inadequacy in providing infrastructure and public services, and security problems in the country make it difficult to return to Syria. In this context, the report benefited from different researches and scientific studies, as well as field observations, surveys and interviews conducted in various countries, and the experiences of humanitarian aid organizations operating in the field.

## INTRODUCTION

Popular protests, called the Arab Spring, initiated by the Arab people with their demands for democracy, freedom, economic demands and human rights, also affected Syrians, who have been ruled by an authoritarian regime by the Baath Party for 41 years, and the Syrian people started protests against the Baath Regime on March 15, 2011. However, the situation in Syria has not resulted in the overthrow of the dictator, as in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, and has turned into an ongoing civil war.

As the civil war in Syria, which has almost completely destroyed the country, enters its 13th year, the country still faces deep political divisions, major economic challenges, a humanitarian crisis and the world's largest displacement situation. Conflicts and political solution initiatives that involve a wide range of actors, from the United States of America (the USA) to Russia, have almost reached an impasse. As the civil war enters its 13th year, the people of the region continue to struggle for survival amid great political chaos, a deep humanitarian and economic crisis, serious security concerns and rights violations.

In the civil war in Syria, since the first protests began, hundreds of thousands of people have lost their lives, been injured and disabled, and millions of people have been displaced. Situation, which became extremely complex with the involvement of other states in

the conflicts that started between Assad regime supporters and opponents in Syria, has led to a major humanitarian crisis that still continues in the country today. Research and analysis on the subject reveal that it is not possible to resolve the situation in Syria, which is on the verge of a de facto division, in the near future, and may even worsen.

## SITUATION IN SYRIA: POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, SECURITY AND HUMANITARIAN PERSPECTIVES

The civil war and conflicts that have been going on for 13 years in Syria have caused irreparable destruction and losses to the Syrian people and economy. 13 million people, more than half of the country's pre-conflict population of approximately 21 million, were displaced as refugees both within the country and mostly in neighboring countries.

As a result of death toll, forced displacement, destruction of infrastructure, destruction of human capital and brain drain from the country because of the situation, the social, economic and political structure of the country has been destroyed and is increasing. Socioeconomic conditions are rapidly deteriorating and are affected by a series of shocks, such as protracted armed conflicts, almost completely destroyed infrastructure, proxy wars, economic sanctions, the Covid-19 pandemic and the economic consequences



Syria Map (Map Design: Esra Tatli)

of the war in Ukraine. All these factors are causing Syria to turn into an unlivable country in terms of political, social, economic and humanitarian aspects, and there is no sign that this situation, which has been going bad for a long time, is improving.

### Political Instability

On March 15, 2011, thousands of Syrian citizens gathered in Deraa city and took to the streets to protest the imprisonment and torture of fifteen students due to anti-Assad regime graffiti.<sup>2</sup> The protesters' main demands were democratic and economic reforms and the release of political prisoners.<sup>3</sup> However, the Regime's brutal response to these peaceful protests triggered a cycle of violence that still haunts Syria today.<sup>4</sup>

Emergence of militia groups with the arming of the rebels after the regime's attacks is considered the starting point of the armed struggle phase of the conflict in Syria.<sup>5</sup> On July 29, 2011, the Free Syrian Army (FSA)<sup>6</sup>, including soldiers and commanders from the Syrian army, was established for the purpose of armed struggle against the Assad regime.<sup>7</sup> violence that has constantly escalated since then has turned the demands for rights, which started with peaceful protests, into one of the most tragic civil wars of the last decade, leaving millions of dead, injured and displaced people behind, and continues to do so.

Almost from the beginning of the conflict until today, many external actors have been supporting the conflicting parties in the country in various ways.

In addition, with the emergence of DAESH and its gain in power in Iraq, its influence in Syria has led to the arrival of many foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) to the country, thus internationalizing the armed conflicts in the country. Today, Syria is a geopolitical “chessboard” used by various powers for their interests and showdowns.

Today, Syria is politically divided into four main structures. Russia’s direct military interventions in Syria at the request of Bashar Assad in 2015 and the presence of foreign powers such as Iran in the country caused the Assad regime to survive and the opposition to lose power. Today, 25% of the land covering the Turkish border and the eastern region in Syria is under the control of PYD/YPG, the Syrian branch of the separatist terrorist organization PKK.<sup>8</sup>

Western Syria or Fertile Syria, which corresponds to 64% of the country’s total land and includes important cities of the country such as Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo are controlled by the Assad regime. The Syrian National Army (SNA), which is defined as the Syrian opposition and consists of Turkish-backed groups, operates the region in Northwest Syria, which corresponds to 7% of the total Syrian territory that includes the regions where military operations such as the Euphrates Shield (2016), Olive Branch (2018) and Peace Spring (2019) Operations carried out by Turkey against terrorist organizations such as DAESH and PYD/YPG were carried out. An-

other group opposing the Assad regime, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), stands out as the dominant power in the Idlib region, which corresponds to a land size of approximately 4%.<sup>9</sup>

Other Syrian opposition, which is dominant in the Tanif region in the south, on the Jordanian border, with the support of the USA, has also lost coordination and unity with the opposition in the north due to the influence of geographical and political conditions.

In this context, it is impossible to talk about a unitary structure in Syria today, where many actors are visible on the field with civil war and conflicts. In addition to these control areas and actors, various external powers and non-state actors still continue to exist in the country. For this reason, conflicts still continue and some areas may come under the control of different actors and groups.

When the positions and current situations of the actors and armed groups in Syria are examined, it is seen that the conflicts that started with the demand for fundamental rights from the Assad regime in the country and turned into a local rebellion as a result of the regime’s violent response to this demand, turned into an “international civil war” with the intervention of international actors. Considering the current situation in Syria, it is understood that the establishment of a permanent peace and a democratic solution in the country depends on the solution of quite complex equations. Therefore, Syria’s current political situation is far from being a stable country.



## Security Concerns

Syrian Network for Human Rights, an independent human rights monitoring organization based in the United Kingdom that also exchanges information with the UN, published a report titled *The Ruthless Bombing in 2017*. The report states that the Syrian regime used more than 70 thousand barrel bombs from July 2012 to 2017.<sup>10</sup>

Another report published by the same institution on April 15, 2021, stated that the regime forces dropped approximately 82 thousand barrel bombs in nine years, and a total of 11,087 civilians, including 1,821 children, died in these bombings.<sup>11</sup> In other words, in the last four years alone, the regime in Syria has used at least 12 thousand barrel bombs against its own people and murdered thousands of people, most of them civilians. However, not only the regime forces, but all parties to the conflict in Syria resort to various acts of violence, making Syria an unsafe place for civilians.

Number of deaths due to conflicts and civil war in Syria since the beginning of the protests in 2011 is 230,224.<sup>12</sup> 30,007 of them are children and 16,319 are women. It is stated that 15,275 of these deaths were caused by torture. Number of people arrested and forcibly disappeared was recorded as 154,871.<sup>13</sup>

According to these figures, covering the months of March 2011 and March 2022, the Assad regime is responsible for 201,055 of these deaths, of

which 22,981 are children and 11,976 are women. 6,950 civilians, including 2,048 children and 977 women, were murdered by Russia, one of the Regime's most important allies. While some of these are civilians killed in Aleppo, a significant part of them consists of civilians killed in the ongoing Russian attacks in Idlib.

PKK/YPG, also known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), killed 1,420 civilians, including 250 children and 169 women. The Syrian National Army (SNA) is held responsible for the deaths of 4,206 civilians, including 1,007 children and 885 women. It is stated that Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which controls the Idlib region, caused the death of 517 civilians, including 74 children and 79 women. The USA, Iran and other international powers, which are parties to the conflict in Syria, are also held responsible for the deaths of more than 10 thousand civilians.<sup>14</sup>

When the numbers given above are analyzed, it is seen that 91% of the civilians who lost their lives due to the conflicts and civil war in Syria were killed by the Assad regime and its allies. In addition, the fact that approximately 52% of the civilians killed were recorded in areas under the control of the Assad regime, such as Damascus and its surrounding suburbs, Aleppo and Homs, shows that Syria is not a safe place for civilians.<sup>15</sup> It clearly shows how insecure Suriye is, especially the areas under the control of the Assad regime, which are considered safe especially by some Western coun-

tries such as Denmark. It should not be forgotten that some of these deaths took place in Regime prisons, which are famous for their torture.

In summary, the data currently obtained from the field shows that the whole of Syria is in an unliveable situation for civilians. Regardless of which side of the civil war and conflict is under control, Syria is a country that is life-threatening and poses serious risks to life safety for all people currently living in the country and those who will be repatriated.

### **Bloody examples of the impossibility of living in Syria: Idlib and Houla**

Even before Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil conflict, the Assad regime was conducting attacks on civilians in the Idlib region. According to the 2014 report of the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, regime forces attacked multiple sites in and around Idlib.<sup>16</sup> Between July and October 2013, the Jabal al-Zawiya region, and the villages of Saraqib, Kafr Nabl, and Maaret al-Numan were subjected to heavy bombardments. The bombardment of a marketplace in Ariha on July 21, 2013, was one of these attacks.<sup>17</sup> According to the Commission's report, barrel explosives were also used in these attacks.<sup>18 19</sup>

In addition to bombardments, regime forces and their Iranian-backed mili-



On May 25, 2012, 109 civilians, including 49 children and 34 women, were murdered by government forces in Syrian hamlet of Houla near Homs. Numerous visual resources depict the Houla massacre and the murdered civilians.

tias committed numerous murders in Idlib and Homs in the early years of the civil war. On May 25, 2012, pro-regime Shabiha militants and affiliated militias committed an hours-long massacre in Houla, a region containing three villages northwest of Homs. During this atrocity, they murdered at least 108 people, including women and children, house by house in the surrounding villages using knives and bullets. In the massacre, 49 infants and 20 women were killed.

Human Rights Watch reports that some of those responsible for the massacre wore military uniforms, while others wore civilian clothing and identified the victims by name before murdering them.<sup>20</sup> This makes what occurred in Houla more than

an atrocity; it is viewed as a massive and systematic attempt to eradicate a predominantly oppositional region.

With Russia's involvement in the civil war, regime-aligned forces, backed by Iran and Russia, started to seize opposition-held territory. There have been tens of thousands of civilian casualties because of these attacks, which were conducted without regard for civilian vulnerability. Airstrikes have caused the greatest number of civilian casualties among these attacks.

In addition to civilian communities, these attacks also target infrastructure facilities, commercial zones, refugee centers, hospitals, and schools. The fact that the civilian population, children, animals, and infrastructure facilities are harmed in these attacks, which are ostensibly aimed at armed groups, rather than the armed elements in the region, reveals that Assad regime forces' true objective is not to fight armed groups in the region, but rather to victimize the 4.5 million people who live in the region.

These attacks are a grave violation of human rights. In addition, these assaults should be investigated under international law's law of war and crimes against humanity provisions. Investigations into the attacks on the Idlib region revealed that they were carried out by elements loyal to Russia and the Assad regime, that they targeted civilians, residential areas, infrastructure facilities, and commercial areas, and that they resulted in the deaths of many civilians, including children.

## Economic Troubles

Current economic situation in Syria is quite dire. Between 2010 and 2021, GDP shrank by more than half, leading the World Bank to re-classify Syria as a low-income country in 2018. Real GDP is projected to contract by 5.5 percent in 2023, following a 3.5 percent decline in the previous year.<sup>21</sup> In addition to the ongoing conflicts, insufficient reconstruction efforts within the country are also a strong sign that economic development does not seem possible in the coming periods. Rising inflation, reduced access to goods, disrupted supply chains, and heightened logistics costs have all contributed to worsening economic conditions.

Thus, current Syrian economy is facing significant challenges. Devastating



Image: People walk past collapsed buildings on Thursday in the town of Jinderis, in Syria's Aleppo province, days after a massive earthquake devastated the region. Source: Ghaith Alsayed/AP

earthquake in February 2023 exacerbated existing socio-economic issues, including inflation and unemployment. The earthquake caused extensive material damage, particularly in the housing sector, with over 87,000 housing units partially damaged or destroyed.

The earthquake, whose epicenter was in the Kahramanmaraş province of Türkiye, affected not only Türkiye but also the northwestern parts of Syria. These earthquakes severely hit northern and western Syria, causing widespread physical damages and losses amounting to about 10 percent of Syria's GDP. The affected areas were home to a large share of the population and economic activity, representing around 31 percent of the total population and about 17 percent of GDP in 2022.<sup>22</sup> The estimated cost of damage and losses is nearly \$9 billion, with recovery needs totaling \$14.8 billion over

the next three years. The earthquake also led to the loss of employment for over 170,000 workers, affecting micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs). The Syrian GDP is expected to decline by approximately 5.5% in 2023.<sup>23</sup> The earthquake also disrupted economic activities and trade, leading to a contraction in economic output and oil production. Additionally, the destruction of roads and maritime facilities halted shipping and cargo arrivals, causing delays in delivering cross-border humanitarian assistance. The earthquake, combined with the ongoing conflict and displacement, has further deteriorated the already dire economic conditions in Syria.

In addition to the earthquake's impact, Syria is experiencing rising inflation and a high cost of living. Prices of essential goods, including food, have risen by approximately 30%, further straining the population. Inflation rates have been high, reaching around 113.5% to 114% in 2020 and 55% to 55.7% in the first half of 2022. The continuous devaluation of the Syrian pound and the lack of effective economic policies have severely impacted the purchasing power of the people. The cost of living has significantly increased, with the minimum cost of living for a Syrian family of five rising by more than 97.9% over a year.<sup>24</sup>

The majority of the population in Syria lives below the poverty line, and around 15.3 million people require humanitarian assistance. The Assad Regime's



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response to the economic challenges, including the earthquake's aftermath, has been criticized as inadequate. Many people in all parts of Syria are seeking alternative sources of income, relying on remittances from the Syrian diaspora, which play a crucial role in providing foreign exchange.

### Deepening Humanitarian Crisis

While more than half a million people have lost their lives since the start of the conflicts, half of Syria's population before the civil war has migrated both within and outside the country. In many parts of the country, millions of people continue their lives under very difficult conditions, deprived of many basic needs, services and rights.

Conflicts have left millions of Syrians in need of humanitarian aid to survive. In Syria, where 22 million people currently live, it is estimated that 15.3 million people will be in need of assistance by 2023. Population in question corresponds to almost 70% of Syria's total population. This figure was announced as 14.6 million people in 2022. The UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen emphasized that "As we move into 2023, the Syrian people remain trapped in a profound humanitarian, political, military, security, economic and human rights crisis of great complexity and almost unimaginable scale".

Number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) due to conflict is 6.8 million. A large part of this population continues their lives in Northwest Syria. Across

Syria, 68% of IDPs are deprived of basic means of livelihood, 67% are deprived of basic services, and 55% are deprived of access to basic food. More than 4.1 million people need humanitarian assistance in Northwest Syria alone. 97% of the population in the region lives in extreme poverty. More than 80% of the population is food insecure.<sup>25</sup>

Number of children deprived of education is 2.4 million. Total number of people living in regular/irregular camps is 2.1 million.<sup>26</sup> 1.9 million of them live in 1430 regular/irregular camps in Northwest Syria.<sup>27</sup> 56% of this population consists of children and 23% is women.<sup>28</sup> Living conditions are much more difficult for people living in these camps. In addition to having very limited access to basic rights such as health and education, access to food and clean water is also very limited. Refugees, who live a life deprived of hygiene, security and many basic needs, face heating and shelter problems on cold winter days.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) states that it is estimated that more than 610 thousand people died due to the civil war in Syria from March 15, 2011 to 2022, and documented 499,657 of them. Of the approximately 500 thousand people whose deaths were documented, 160,681 were civilians. Of the civilians who lost their lives, 15,237 were women and 25,286 were children. 49,359 civilians lost their lives under torture in the prisons of the Assad regime. Number of people who lost their lives in Russian-backed air at-

tacks is 35,086. 1028 people were killed in attacks using prohibited weapons, including the attacks in Aleppo, Eastern Ghouta, Hula and Idlib. Number of civilians killed by the PYD/YPG is 418.<sup>29</sup>

These figures do not include civilians who have lost their lives since March 2022 and 2023. In addition, 2022 has been recorded as the year with the fewest deaths since the start of the civil war. There were periods during the year when attacks increased and decreased. Since 2022, 3,825 deaths due to civil war have been recorded across Syria. 1627 of those who lost their lives were civilians. 159 of these civilians are women and 321 are children.<sup>30</sup>

One of the most important indicators that reveal the extent of the humanitarian crisis in Syria is the almost complete destruction of infrastructure. One in four schools in the country were damaged, destroyed or used as shelters. According to World Bank data, one-third of the houses and half of the hospitals and educational institutions in Syria have been destroyed. Less than half of primary school-aged children are enrolled in school, while only one in three secondary and university-aged students has access to education. Years of conflict have damaged or rendered schools, water and sewage systems completely unusable.<sup>31</sup>

Even if it is thought that the civil war in the country has ended today, it is stated that it will take at least 40 years for the country to recover. More than 15 million people still need humani-

tarian assistance in Syria. However, the vast majority of these people who need assistance have limited access to assistance. UN reports state that the majority of Syrians are below the poverty line, unemployed, living in unhealthy housing conditions and do not have access to sufficient food. The UN has described what happened in Syria since March 2011 as the worst humanitarian crisis since the end of the Second World War. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2.8 million people have suffered permanent disabilities due to the civil war in the country.<sup>32</sup>

Today, approximately 60% of the Syrian population is a refugee due to war-related reasons, and people continue to experience severe grievances due to the political deadlock. While approximately 7 million Syrians were displaced within the country, at least 6.6 million Syrians were forced to migrate to other countries. The psychosocial effects of this situation have dispersed families, and almost all civilians have been affected by these conditions in some way. According to the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), 1 million of 5 million Syrian children born since 2011 were born outside the country as refugees.<sup>33</sup> In Syria, 2.4 million school-age children, 40% of whom are girls, are deprived of their right to education.<sup>34</sup>

Although it is very difficult to determine the exact destruction in the country because the conflicts in Syria have not yet ended, even the available

data is sufficient to reveal the magnitude of the destruction. The World Bank prepared a comprehensive report in 2017 and tried to determine the financial loss caused by the ongoing war in Syria. The report notes that the infrastructure throughout the country has suffered great damage, especially in Aleppo and Homs, where conflicts have intensified. 8% of the total house stock in the country was completely destroyed and 23% was damaged. Health and education infrastructure, as well as shelter, were badly damaged in the war. 16% of health facilities were destroyed and 50% were damaged. Similarly, 10% of educational institutions were destroyed and 53% were damaged. In addition, water production and treatment facilities were also severely damaged. Two-thirds of water processing plants, half of pump stations, one-third of water towers, one-quarter of treatment plants and one in every six water wells were destroyed or damaged. The UN estimates the cost of destroyed homes since the start of the war to be around \$400 billion. Additionally, considering that these figures are from 2017, it can be stated that the extent of the current destruction in Syria is much greater, with the destruction that has occurred over the past 6 years.<sup>35</sup>

While the general infrastructure of the country was greatly damaged, the destruction in the health infrastructure in particular caused hundreds of thousands of patients and injured people to suffer. Systematic attacks have been carried out against hospitals



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and healthcare institutions, as well as healthcare workers, especially doctors, healthcare vehicles such as ambulances, and even patients and injured people. Due to all these attacks, the health system in the country and the treatment conditions of the sick and injured have suffered a great blow. According to a report by the American Medical Association, Syria is the most dangerous place in the world to be a doctor.<sup>36</sup> It is stated that due to both attacks targeting healthcare workers and heavy damage to healthcare centers, even vital surgeries are now performed without anesthesia in Syria, and births are attempted to be performed without medical assistance.

When the above-mentioned information about the humanitarian situation in Syria is examined, it can be clearly seen that all regions of Syria are in a deep humanitarian crisis and are not suitable for return, but also have very difficult humanitarian conditions even for people currently living in Syria.

### **POLITICAL TRUMP OF THE ASSAD REGIME AND ALLIES: HUMANITARIAN AID**

There are over 6 million Syrians who have fled the country due to the 13-year civil conflict, as well as over 6 million Syrians who are internally displaced. The preponderance of these displaced individuals requires humanitarian assistance. Since March 2011, Syria has experienced unprecedented destruction and devastation, and over 15 million people require humanitarian assistance. Several partner organizations, including the United Nations and its affiliates, are providing humanitarian aid to the region. These cargoes are transported via road through border crossings.

Immediately following the onset of hostilities, relief efforts for those in need in the region began. With Resolution 2165, the first UN cargo from Turkey to Syria began on July 24, 2014. After the adoption of Resolution 2165 (2014), the following resolutions were adopted: 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020), 2533 (2020), 2585 (2021), 2642 (2022), and 2672



Turkey, Jordan, and Iraq are just a few of Syria's neighbors who are providing aid to the region's more than 4 million residents.

(2023). These resolutions granted UN agencies and partners permission to use the Bab al-Salam, Bab al-Hawa, al-Yarubiyah, and al-Ramtha border crossings to deliver humanitarian and medical aid to Syria. In this context, UN agencies such as UNHCR, UNICEF, UNFPA, WFP, WHO, FAO, and IOM provide humanitarian assistance, which includes food, hygiene items, medical apparatus and medications, education, and shelter.<sup>37</sup>

Turkey, Jordan, and Iraq are just a few of Syria's neighbors who are providing aid to the region's more than 4 million residents. In January 2020, however, aid activities through al-Ramtha (Jordan) and al-Yarubiyah (Iraq) were terminated due to Russia's veto and United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions. The same decision prolonged the use of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing for one year, while the use of the Bab al-Salam border crossing was extended



for six months. As of July 10, 2020, UNSCR 2533, the only border crossing through which humanitarian aid can enter Syria is the Bab al-Hawa crossing. Hence, the Bab al-Hawa border crossing is not a typical border crossing, but rather a “life saver” for millions of people in the region in need of humanitarian aid due to the ongoing civil conflict. Before the expiration of Resolution 2533, negotiations were initiated to extend the aid for an additional year, but Russia, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, vetoed the resolution. After the veto of the one-year extension, a six-month extension plan was agreed upon, taking into consideration Russia’s proposal.

UNSC unanimously authorized the extension of UNSCR 2533, which expired on July 10, 2021, on July 9, 2021. Consequently, resolution 2585 (2021) extended the authorization for the UN and its affiliates and partners to coordinate and deliver cross-border humanitarian assistance from Turkey to northwestern Syria without the consent of the government of Bashar al-Assad for an additional year, until 10 July 2022.<sup>38</sup>

Prior to the negotiations, Russia threatened to veto the renewal of the authorization to enable cross-border aid, but just one day before the expiration of the previous authorization, a compromise was reached.<sup>39</sup> With the UNSC’s decision no 2642 (2022), the authorization to use only the Bab al-Air border crossing for hu-

manitarian aid activities to Syria has been extended for six months until January 10, 2023. For the next six months (through 10 July 2023), it was determined that a separate decision would be necessary.<sup>40</sup>

Resolution 2642 (2022) was passed with 12 affirmative votes to 3 abstentions. France, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America (USA) abstained from voting. The officials who made statements on the matter attributed the abstentions to Russia’s imposition of a six-month extension of the resolution and their fears that this period was insufficient for humanitarian aid activities and could impede them.

The United Nations Security Council convened on January 9, 2023, and unanimously approved a resolution extending humanitarian aid operations through Turkey until July 10, 2023.<sup>41</sup> Russia, which has repeatedly used its veto in previous votes and viewed the decision-making process regarding the continuation of humanitarian aid as a tool for its political interests, issued a statement through its Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Vassily Nebenzia, stating that they had made the “difficult decision” to support the adoption of the resolution. This statement obviously reflects Russia’s perspective on the region, which approves the continuation of humanitarian aid with a “difficult decision” in a setting where millions of people require humanitarian aid.

The statement made by UN Secretary-General's spokesperson Stephane Dujarric after the vote, "The decision comes at a time when humanitarian needs are at their highest level since the beginning of the conflict in 2011, and when people in Syria are struggling with a harsh winter and a cholera epidemic," reveals the magnitude of the humanitarian crisis in the region.<sup>42</sup>

In accordance with the latest agreement between the Assad administration and the UN on cross-border humanitarian aid from Turkey to Syria, humanitarian aid activities to be carried out from Bab-ül Havva (Cilvegözü) and Bab-üs Selam (Öncüpınar) border gates have been extended until 13 November 2023.

As the latest development, in his statement on November 13, Spokesman for the United Nations Secretary-General, Stéphanie Dujarric announced that, in accordance with the agreement reached with the Assad regime, use of Bab al-Salam and Al Ra'ee crossings by the UN to deliver humanitarian aid across the border from southern Türkiye to north-west Syria, has been extended until February 1, 2024.<sup>43</sup>

### **Instrumentalization of Humanitarian Aid**

To deny the people in the region access to their most necessities, Russia intends to close the border crossing, which is their only hope for survival, by vetoing UN resolutions allowing aid to enter the region. As a permanent member of

the UN Security Council, Russia is using its veto power to block the delivery of aid to the region. Due to Russia's use of the veto as a diplomatic trump card, the humanitarian assistance activities, have occasionally been in jeopardy of being halted since 2014.

Russia, which is directly involved in the Syrian conflict, is employing its position and veto authority in the UN Security Council to exert pressure on Damascus to channel all humanitarian aid, including aid to northern Syria.

However, if aid is coordinated by Damascus, it will undoubtedly only reach regime supporters. In addition, the fact that the United Nations and international community are addressing the Regime in humanitarian aid activities will give the impression that the Regime is the sole "legitimate" power. From this perspective, it is possible to assert that Russia and the Assad regime have instrumentalized and exploited humanitarian aid efforts.

Thus, the Assad regime, backed by Russia's power in the UN, is trying to expand its own legitimacy area by using humanitarian aid as leverage, while on the other hand, it is pushing its opponents, especially the people in need of humanitarian aid in Northwest Syria, into a deeper humanitarian crisis.

### **RETURN TO SYRIA: WHY? AND WHY NOT?**

Migration, which has become one of the most important social and political

phenomena, occupies the agenda of many countries. Migration movements can be handled in various ways within the context of the political interests of the countries. In this context, countries may have various agendas and discourses regarding the situation of Syrian refugees in the countries where they are refugees and their return to Syria.

It can be seen that Russia, Iran, European states and other states where Syrian refugees live are enthusiastic about the return of Syrian refugees, but they support the return of refugees for different reasons. For example, Assad regime and its ally, Russia call for the return of Syrian refugees to Syria at every opportunity. Behind this call is an attempt to create a misleading image that Syria is a safe and stable place. Thus, in this way, Assad regime expects to break international isolation on itself and receive financial support under the name of the reconstruction of Syria.

Assad aims to develop relations with political parties and groups in these countries, under the pretext of negotiating the return of Syrians, by using the extreme right, anti-foreigner and anti-refugee sentiment that has recently risen in Europe. In addition, it invites social media influencers and various political figures from many parts of the world to the country, records their images in certain places under the guidance of the Regime's officials and has them served on social media platforms.

Despite all these efforts of Assad regime, reasons such as political and economic instability in Syria, destroyed infrastructure, ongoing conflicts and attacks continue to exist as the most important obstacles to the return of refugees.

On the other hand, anti-refugee and xenophobia incidents are increasing in many countries that host Syrian refugees, such as Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Greece, Denmark and Germany. It is seen that there is an increasing tendency among the public to say that refugee groups, including Syrian refugees, should return to their countries due to the populist discourses of some political parties in these countries and the economic difficulties in



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the countries. In this context, various physical, psychological and verbal attacks against Syrian refugees are also recorded.

However, despite this negative environment in the countries where they live as refugees and Assad regime's calls to "come back", it seems that Syrian refugees have no inclination to return to Syria. On the contrary, various ongoing waves of migration from Syria are recorded, although not as intense as in the past.

Despite the picture drawn above, the main reasons why Syrian refugees do not show any intention of returning to Syria can be listed as follows;

1. Conflicts still continue in Syria, and due to these conflicts, the life safety of people is still under threat regardless of the region of Syria.

2. Serious human rights violations are still committed by local and international actors who are parties to the civil war and conflicts in Syria.

3. Economic conditions throughout Syria are very bad. In a country where job opportunities are very limited, access to basic needs is also limited or very costly.

4. Basic infrastructure and public services such as education, health, electricity and water cannot be adequately provided in any of the regions in Syria.

These reasons can be multiplied further. However, it is clear that the fundamental conclusion will not change. It is that although Assad regime and other actors make statements regarding the return of Syrians, there are their own agendas and interests behind these intentions. In addition, it is quite clear that the current economic, political, security and humanitarian situation in Syria is not conducive for return.



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## **LEGAL AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY OF REPATRIATION**

Considering the reasons detailed above, it is clear that the current situation in Syria is not conducive to return and to live a life worthy of human dignity. However, despite all these facts, in many countries where Syrian refugees live, there are social and political dynamics that argue that Syria is livable and that Syrians should return to

Syria. However, it should not be forgotten that, according to international law as well as all the realities on the ground, return to Syria does not seem possible unless there is a voluntary return.

Principle of non-refoulement is one of the most important practices brought by the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, Article 33 of the 5th chapter of the Convention titled “Administrative Measures” states that “No Contracting State shall expel or return (“refouler”) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.”

In accordance with the article, none of the contracting states can send refugees in their country to another country where they may be subjected to torture or deprived of their right to life. Although it is thought that the aforementioned ban is only technically applicable to refugees, since the ban on refoulement has become customary law rather than a contractual provision, in accordance with the European Convention on Human Rights, anyone whose right to life will be taken away or who will be deprived of their freedom is considered within the scope of the refoulement ban.

Any attempt contrary to the 1951 Geneva Convention constitutes a violation of both this convention and the European Convention on Human

Rights, especially Article 3, which regulates the prohibition of torture. Syrian Arab Republic, which experienced turmoil that started as a civil war in 2011 and gave way to proxy wars, is far from a safe state status today. Chaos that spread throughout the country in a short time and continues continuously has not calmed down yet, despite the passage of approximately 11 years.

Some cities in the region, such as Idlib, are still bombed by the Assad regime and its allies like Russia. Therefore, people who have to live in these regions are face to face with death at any moment. People living in cities under the control of the Assad government also have the same fear because anyone who is thought to be an opponent to Assad regime is detained by law enforcement forces and imprisoned without any trial.

Moreover, these people are subjected to humiliating and ill-treatment, and are even tortured and killed. No sanctions can be applied against these inhumane treatments of the Assad regime, which has put aside even national law, let alone international law. Fact that the Russian, acting together with the Assad regime, is one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and uses its veto right in decisions regarding Syria, prevents the UN from taking effective measures against what is happening in Syria.

In addition to all these, documents and evidence about the killing of

thousands of people held in Assad regime prisons are gradually reflected in the press. Under these circumstances, there is no need to further state that Syrian citizens who have been living outside the borders of the Syrian Arab Republic for years are considered oppositionists by the Assad regime. If these people are sent to Damascus and other cities under the control of the regime, it is highly likely that they will be subjected to all kinds of humiliating and ill-treatment, and may even be subjected to torture and their lives may be attempted.

Despite all this, sending Syrian citizens, who are living in European countries as refugees, to Damascus and other cities, which are under the control of the Assad government and claimed to be safe, will impose responsibilities on the sending countries both within the scope of the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the European Convention on Human Rights.

## **CONCLUSION: AS DEMONSTRATED**

Current civil war and conflicts in Syria has caused deep political, economic and social crises in the country. These crises continue to affect the civilian population. So much so that in many residential areas of the country, already inadequate infrastructure in the pre-war period has completely collapsed, residential areas have turned into ruins due to the conflicts, access to water and food has become very difficult, and

even the most basic health and education services have become inaccessible.

Conflict lines that are still active in Syria today and the actions of regime forces and other armed actors aimed at preventing and slowing down humanitarian access activities to the region continue to affect the civilian population. This current environment in the country is described as a situation where international humanitarian law and human rights law are widely violated and the principle of protection of civilians is neglected.

It is clear that ongoing violations by various parties in the Syrian conflict have significantly contributed to the refugee crisis. Despite a recent reduction in the frequency of violations, the cumulative impact over the past 13 years has severely worsened the human rights situation in Syria. Syria's economy has sharply declined since 2021, and also Syria is ranked in 161st place out of 163 nations on the annual Global Peace Index (GPI) issued annually by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP). The country faces issues such as killings, arbitrary arrests, forced displacement, torture, land seizures, and insecurity. The lack of accountability and no apparent resolution has led hundreds of Syrians to flee, selling their properties to seek asylum elsewhere. Consequently, most Syrian refugees are reluctant to return due to dangerous conditions, and those remaining in the country desperately seek opportunities to escape.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>3</sup>International Crisis Group, (2011), “Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VII): The Syrian Regime’s Slow-Motion Suicide”, Rapor No. 109, ss. 4-6.

<sup>4</sup>Nikolaos van Dam, (2017), “Destroying A Nation: The Civil War in Syria”, ss. 79-80.

<sup>5</sup>Roger Petersen, (2013), “Roles and Mechanisms of Insurgency and the Conflict in Syria,” içinde *The Political Science of Syria’s War*, ss. 18-23.

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<sup>7</sup>Charles Lister, (2016), *The Free Syrian Army: A Decentralized Insurgent Brand*, Analysis Paper No. 26, ss. 5-8.

<sup>8</sup>Jusoor, (2023), “Map of military control across Syria at the end of 2022 and the beginning of 2023”. Accessed: <https://jusoor.co/en/details/map-of-military-control-across-syria-at-the-end-of-2022-and-the-beginning-of-2023>

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<sup>10</sup>Syrian Network For Human Rights, (2017), “The Syrian Regime Has Dropped Nearly 70,000 Barrel Bombs on Syria”. Accessed: <https://snhr.org/blog/2017/12/25/49915/>

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<sup>12</sup>Since these figures include the dead, injured and missing records that the SNHR institution can detect, data from other institutions working in the field to understand the real human cost of civil war are also included in the following sections.

<sup>13</sup>Syrian Network For Human Rights, (2023), “The 12th Annual Report”. Accessed: <https://snhr.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/R230211E-1.pdf>

<sup>14</sup>Syrian Network For Human Rights, (2023), “The 12th Annual Report”. Accessed: <https://snhr.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/R230211E-1.pdf>

<sup>15</sup>Syrian Network For Human Rights, (2023), “The 12th Annual Report”. Accessed: <https://snhr.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/R230211E-1.pdf>

<sup>16</sup>Official Documents System of the United Nations, Accessed: <https://documents.un.org/prod/ods.nsf/home.xsp>

<sup>17</sup>Syrian Network For Human Rights, (2013), “The Documentation of Ariha Massacre in Idlib Governorate”, Accessed: [https://snhr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/The\\_Documentation\\_of\\_Ariha\\_Massacre\\_in\\_Idlib\\_Governorate\\_2013\\_en.pdf](https://snhr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/The_Documentation_of_Ariha_Massacre_in_Idlib_Governorate_2013_en.pdf)

<sup>18</sup>Oral Update of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (June 16, 2014) Accessed: Human Rights Council <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G14/053/55/PDF/G1405355.pdf?OpenElement> “Selected testimonies from victims of the Syrian conflict” (Sept. 16 2014) Human Rights Council <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G14/161/85/PDF/G1416185.pdf?OpenElement>

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<sup>25</sup>IOM, (2022), Syrian Arab Republic Crisis Response Plan 2023.

<sup>26</sup>HNO, (2023), Syrian Arab Republic Humanitarian Programme Cycle 2023

<sup>27</sup>OCHA, (2023), North-West Syria Situation Report.

<sup>28</sup>UNHCR CCCM Cluster, (2023), Camp Crisis in North-west Syria.

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<sup>32</sup>EuroMed Human Rights Monitor, (2016). “Syria: 2.8 million now have permanent disabilities”, 4.12.2016, Accessed: <https://euromedmonitor.org/en/article/1609/Syria:-2.8-million-now-have-permanent-disabilities>

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<sup>40</sup>“Security Council Renews Cross-Border Aid Operations into Syria’s North-West for Six Months, Adopting Resolution 2642 (2022) as ‘Compromise’ amid Divisions” (July 12, 2022) <https://bit.ly/3HymRPd>

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This report aims to reveal the humanitarian, socio-economic and political dimension of the civil war in Syria, which has been going on for approximately 13 years. It aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the dimensions of the humanitarian crisis in the country, as well as how Syria's divided structure and political instability, economic difficulties, inadequacy in providing infrastructure and public services, and security problems in the country make it difficult to return to Syria. In this context, the report benefited from different researches and scientific studies, as well as field observations, surveys and interviews conducted in various countries, and the experiences of humanitarian aid organizations operating in the field.



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