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# The Syrian civil war: Timeline and statistics

<b>Summary</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1 Brief timeline of the Syrian civil war</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2 The Syrian civil war in numbers</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1 Casualties	6
2.2 Impact on children	7
2.3 Refugees and displaced people	8
2.4 Humanitarian needs of the population	10
2.5 Access to aid and services	11
2.6 Syria's economic crisis	12
<b>3 The UK and Syria: Key statistics</b>	<b>13</b>
3.1 UK aid	13
3.2 UK military activity	15
3.3 UK Islamic State fighters in Syria/Iraq	17
<b>4 Further resources/reading</b>	<b>18</b>

## Summary

Ten years after its civil war began, Syria remains in conflict. President Bashar al-Assad, with the backing of Russia and Iran, however, now seems likely to hold on to power. This is despite the opposition and condemnation of the UK, US and others for his human rights abuses and non-compliance with chemical weapons conventions.

This briefing gives a timeline of main events, statistics on the humanitarian and economic effects of the war, UK participation, and a list of further reading and regularly updated resources on the conflict.

The Library briefing, [Syria and its civil war: A future under Assad?](#) discusses the continuing role of foreign powers in the country, the potential for further fighting, and the prospects for a negotiated peace.

Iranian and Russian backing for Assad, coupled with his strengthened military position and re-engagement with many Arab states, undermines incentives for his regime to make meaningful concessions in future UN-led peace talks.

## 1 Brief timeline of the Syrian civil war

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### 2011: Conflict begins

In March 2011, President Assad faced a significant challenge to his rule when anti-government protests broke out in Syria, inspired by a wave of pro-democracy uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. These events were known as the Arab Spring. By the summer of 2011, armed opposition groups, such as the Free Syrian Army, had emerged.<sup>1</sup>

The Syrian Government rejected a peace plan presented by the [Arab League](#) (an organisation of Arab states in North Africa and the Middle East) and which was backed by the UN.<sup>2</sup> In August, the US, UK, and others called for Assad to stand down. In November 2011, the League suspended Syria's membership.

Background can be found in the Library briefings, [Unrest spreads to Syria](#) (June 2011) and [In brief: Syria crisis](#) (November 2011).

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<sup>1</sup> Council for Foreign Relations, [Syria's civil war: The descent into horror](#), 17 March 2021

<sup>2</sup> Council for Foreign Relations, [The Arab League](#), updated 19 February 2020

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## 2012: Transition into civil war

In 2012, fighting widened and spread to the capital Damascus and Syria's second largest city, Aleppo. In June, a UN official described the country as [being in "civil war"](#) for the first time.<sup>3</sup>

Iran [began to support Assad's regime](#), providing military advisors and supporting the foundation of pro-Government militias, such as the National Defence Forces.<sup>4</sup>

The briefing, [Syria: No end in sight?](#) (August 2012), has more information on this period.

In 2012, the number of Syrian refugees displaced by the conflict reached 500,000. By March 2013, they numbered one million, and by September 2013, two million.<sup>5</sup>

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## 2013: Emergence of Islamic State

2013 included the emergence of Islamic State/IS in eastern Syria and Western Iraq. Over several months, the group established control over large parts of both countries. At its height, the group held around a third of Syria and 40% of Iraq. By December 2017, [it lost 95% of its territory](#), including its nominal capital, [Raqqqa in Syria](#).<sup>6</sup>

## Commons votes against military action in Syria in response to alleged use of chemical weapons by Assad

The Library briefings, [Military forces in Syria and the rise of the Jihadis](#) (April 2013) and [Isis/Daesh: What now for the military campaign in Iraq and Syria?](#) (July 2018) provide policy background.

UN chemical weapons inspectors [confirmed the use of the nerve agent Sarin](#) in an attack on areas around Damascus in August 2013, though did not allocate responsibility to any party.<sup>7</sup> The US said the Syrian Government was to blame.<sup>8</sup> Assad agreed to hand over his remaining chemical weapons and completed this process for the weapons he had declared by June 2014.<sup>9</sup>

In August, the House of Commons [voted against joint-military action](#) with the US against Assad in Syria, in response to his alleged use of chemical weapons.<sup>10</sup>

The Library briefing, [Parliamentary approval for military action](#) provides information on Parliament's role in approving the deployment of the armed forces.

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<sup>3</sup> Reuters, [Syria in civil war. UN official says](#), 12 June 2012

<sup>4</sup> Institute for the Study of War, [Iranian strategy in Syria](#), 2013, pp6, 20

<sup>5</sup> UN Refugee Agency, [Syria: Factsheet. Timeline and figures](#), undated, p1 (pdf)

<sup>6</sup> BBC News, [Islamic State and the crisis in Iraq and Syria in maps](#), 28 March 2018; Wilson Center, [Timeline: The rise, spread and fall of the Islamic state](#), 28 October 2019

<sup>7</sup> BBC News, [Syria chemical attack: What we know](#), 24 September 2013

<sup>8</sup> White House, [Government assessment of the Syrian Government's use of chemical weapons on 21 August 2013](#), 30 August 2013

<sup>9</sup> Reuters, [Syria hands over remaining chemical weapons for destruction](#), 23 June 2014

<sup>10</sup> UK Parliament, [House of Commons debate on Syria](#), 30 August 2013

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## 2014: US-led coalition attacks Islamic State

In August 2014, US air forces intervened militarily in Syria for the first time, as part of a coalition campaign against Islamic State in both Iraq and Syria. Other participants included Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar.<sup>11</sup>

The Library briefing, [Jsis/Daesh: The military response in Iraq and Syria](#) (March 2017) has more on this.

China and Russia [voted against a draft resolution at the UN Security Council](#) which aimed to refer Syria to the International Criminal Court to hold Assad accountable.<sup>12</sup>

In 2014, the UK Government launched the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Programme (VPRP) to allow selected Syrians to come to the UK. In 2015, the Government said it would resettle up to 20,000 people under the scheme.

The Library briefing, [The UK's Syrian VPRP](#) (June 2017) and section 2.3, page 8, of this briefing has more.

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## 2015: Russia launches military campaign

In 2015, Russia, which had previously provided weapons and diplomatic support to Assad, launched its own military campaign. This involved deploying Russian ground troops and aerial attacks on Islamic State and Free Syrian Army forces (who opposed Assad). Russia's intervention is seen by analysts as helping turn the war in Assad's favour.<sup>13</sup>

[UN Security Council Resolution 2254](#), unanimously adopted in December 2015, called for the creation of a constitutional committee to draft a new constitution for Syria.<sup>14</sup> The constitutional committee first met in 2019.

In December 2015, the UK Parliament voted to extend the UK's offensive operations against Islamic State from Iraq into Syria as well. The Library briefing [Legal basis for UK military action in Syria](#) (December 2015) has more.

The number of Syrian refugees stood at four million in 2015.<sup>15</sup> Labelled a "refugee crisis" by the UN, there were 1.3 million asylum claims in the EU that year. Most came from conflict-afflicted countries such as Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The Guardian, [US confirms 14 airstrikes against IS in Syria](#), 23 September 2014

<sup>12</sup> UN, [Referral of Syria to International Criminal Court fails \[...\]](#), 22 May 2014

<sup>13</sup> RAND, [Understanding Russia's intervention in Syria](#), 2019; US Institute for Peace, [What is Russia's endgame in Syria?](#), 16 February 2021; Al-Jazeera, [What has Russia gained from five years of fighting in Syria?](#), 1 October 2020

<sup>14</sup> UN, [Security Council unanimously adopts Resolution 2254 \(2015\)](#), 18 December 2015

<sup>15</sup> UN Refugee Agency, [Total number of Syrian refugees exceeds four million for the first time](#), 9 July 2015

<sup>16</sup> UN Refugee Agency, [2015: The year of Europe's refugee crisis](#), 8 December 2015; BBC News, [Migrant crisis: Migration to Europe explained in seven charts](#), 4 March 2016

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## 2016: Turkish military enter Syria

In August 2016, Turkish forces intervened in northern Syria, targeting Islamic State and some Kurdish forces. Turkey conducted a three further offensives up to March 2020.<sup>17</sup>

The Syrian Government also recaptured parts of Aleppo held by rebel forces since 2012.<sup>18</sup> Some analysts saw this as a turning point in the war against Syrian rebels.<sup>19</sup>

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## 2017: Astana talks between Russia, Turkey, Iran, and Syria

In January 2017, Iran, Turkey, and Russia began talks in Astana in Kazakhstan. These were aimed at consolidating a national ceasefire, which had been agreed the previous December, and establishing pathways towards a political settlement to the conflict.<sup>20</sup>

As part of the Astana talks, the countries agreed to establish four “de-escalation areas” which allowed for the cessation of hostilities.<sup>21</sup> Three of the four areas have now been taken by Syrian Government forces.<sup>22</sup>

The US attacked a Syrian Government airfield in response to reports of a sarin gas attack.<sup>23</sup>

The nominal Islamic State capital, Raqqa, was recaptured in October. By November, the group had [lost 95% of the territory](#) it once held.<sup>24</sup>

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## 2018: UK, US, and France strike Syria in response to chemical weapons

In April 2018, the UK, US, and France said that the Syrian regime was responsible for an alleged chemical weapons attack in Douma, north of Damascus. The three countries conducted airstrikes the same month.

The Library briefing, [Chemical weapons and Syria—in brief](#) (August 2018) has more.

In December, President Trump [announced his intention to withdraw all US troops from Syria](#), declaring that Islamic State had been defeated. Only a partial withdrawal took place.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Carnegie Europe, [How Syria changed Turkey’s foreign policy](#), 14 September 2021

<sup>18</sup> Al-Jazeera, [Syria’s government recaptures all of Aleppo city](#), 22 December 2016

<sup>19</sup> Carnegie Middle East Center, [A turning point in Aleppo](#), 1 December 2016; Chatham House, [Western policy towards Syria: Applying lessons learned](#), 15 March 2017

<sup>20</sup> BBC News, [Syria conflict: Ceasefire agreed, backed by Russia and Turkey](#), 29 December 2016, Al-Jazeera, [Syria talks to begin in Astana as ceasefire holds](#), 22 January 2017

<sup>21</sup> Atlantic Council, [How the “de-escalation zone” plan benefits Syria’s foreign players](#), 23 May 2017

<sup>22</sup> Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, [De-escalation zones in Syria](#), 3 June 2020

<sup>23</sup> BBC News, [Syria war: Why was Shayrat airbase bombed?](#), 7 April 2017

<sup>24</sup> BBC News, [IS loses Deir al-Zour in Syria and al-Qaim in Iraq on same day](#), 3 November 2017

<sup>25</sup> AP News, [Trump pulling out all US troops from Syria, declaring IS defeat](#), 19 December 2018

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### 2019: First meeting of UN-backed constitution committee

In 2019, a new [Syrian constitutional committee](#) met to draft a new constitution for Syria, under UN Resolution 2254. Talks in 2019, 2020, and 2021 failed to make progress.<sup>26</sup>

In response to the Turkish invasion of North Syria against Kurdish forces, US troops withdrew from the Turkish border to other parts of northeast Syria.<sup>27</sup> The briefing [Syria: US withdrawal and Turkish incursion](#) (October 2019), provides more information.

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### 2020: March ceasefire in Idlib largely holds

In March 2020, a ceasefire between Turkey and Russia over Idlib, an area held by several opposition groups, was agreed. This followed several weeks of fighting in the province. The ceasefire has largely held.<sup>28</sup>

The Library briefing, [Syria: The Idlib crisis and Islamic State](#) (March 2020) has more.

Chatham House estimated that [Assad held around 65-70%](#) of Syria by 2020.<sup>29</sup>

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### 2021: Assad wins fourth term in office and talks for a new constitution stall

2021 has seen continued peace talks and an attempt to draft a new constitution for Syria. Both have yet to bear fruit.

Assad won re-election as President, in a poll condemned by the US, UK and EU as unfair and unfree. The Library briefing, [Syria: 2021 presidential election and future prospects](#) (June 2021) provides more information.

Daraa, an area in the south nominally held by the Assad regime, saw intense fighting in mid-2021 following the region's boycotting of the presidential election. A ceasefire, likely brokered by Russia, was agreed in September.

The Library briefing, [Syria and its civil war: A future under Assad?](#) has more.

## 2 The Syrian civil war in numbers

### 2.1 Casualties

#### Casualties in Syria

Due to issues in recording, access, and partiality in the information available, it is unlikely the true figure of those killed and injured will ever be known.

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<sup>26</sup> Middle East Institute, [Syria's constitutional committee: The devil in the detail](#), 6 January 2021

<sup>27</sup> US Institute for Peace, [A month after US withdrawal, what is the state of play in Syria?](#), 7 November 2019

<sup>28</sup> Crisis Group, [Silencing the guns in Syria's Idlib](#), 14 May 2020

<sup>29</sup> Chatham House, [Assessing control and power dynamics in Syria](#), 13 November 2020

In September 2021, the UN [published updated estimates](#) on the number of civilians killed in Syria. It compiled a list of **350,209 individuals killed between March 2011 and March 2021**. 1 in 13 were women, and 1 in 13 were children. This, the UN said, was the “minimum verifiable number” and “certainly an undercount.”<sup>30</sup>

In June 2021, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) said the [total number of those killed](#) from March 2011 to June 2021 **could be as high as 606,000**, including 495,000 documented by the organisation. The total includes civilians, rebel, government and terrorist fighters, and others.<sup>31</sup>

The SOHR also estimated **2.1 million civilians have been injured or made permanently disabled because of the conflict**.<sup>32</sup> In 2016, the World Health Organization had said 1.5 million people had been injured since the crisis began.<sup>33</sup>

## Missing people

The exact number of Syrians who have forcibly disappeared, been detained, abducted, or gone missing is unknown.

In 2019, the [UN said that reports](#) suggested that **more than 100,000 had gone missing since the start of the conflict**, “largely, but not only, because of the Syrian government.”<sup>34</sup>

In 2021, a report to the UN said the whereabouts of “tens of thousands” of those detained remained unknown.<sup>35</sup>

## 2.2

## Impact on children

In addition to the estimated **27,126 children killed** in the ten years from March 2011,<sup>36</sup> according to UN figures:

- From 2011 to 2020 more than **5,700 children were recruited** into the fighting.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> UN Office of High Commissioner on Human Rights, [Oral update on the extent of conflict-related deaths in the Syrian Arab Republic](#), 24 September 2021

<sup>31</sup> SOHR, [Total death toll. Over 606,000 people killed across Syria \[...\]](#), 1 June 2021

<sup>32</sup> SOHR, [Total death toll. Over 606,000 people killed across Syria \[...\]](#), 1 June 2021

<sup>33</sup> WHO, [Syrian Arab Republic: Annual report 2016](#), 2016, p8 (pdf)

<sup>34</sup> UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, [Security Council briefing on detainees and missing persons in Syria](#), 7 August 2019

<sup>35</sup> UN Human Rights Council, [Report of the independent international commission of inquiry into the Syrian Arab Republic](#), 11 March 2021, p9

<sup>36</sup> UN Office of High Commissioner on Human Rights, [Oral update on the extent of conflict-related deaths in the Syrian Arab Republic](#), 24 September 2021

<sup>37</sup> Unicef, [Syria conflict 10 years on](#), 10 March 2021

- In March 2021, **refugee children numbered 2.5 million**.<sup>38</sup>
- In March 2021, **3.5 million children were out of school**, including 40% of girls. Enrolment prior to the conflict was 97%.<sup>39</sup>

## 2.3

## Refugees and displaced people

The total pre-war population of Syria was around 21 million. More than half this population is now displaced from their homes, either internally within Syria or as refugees abroad.<sup>40</sup>

### Internally displaced people (IDP)

As of December 2020, there were around **6.7 million internally displaced people living in Syria**. 5.8 million have been displaced for more than three years. Only 11% of IDP households intended to return to their area of origin in 2021.<sup>41</sup>

As of August 2020, the largest numbers of IDPs are found in opposition controlled Idlib (1.8 million) and regime-controlled Aleppo (1.2 million). The city of Damascus and rural Damascus governorates, held by the regime, had 1.9 million IDPs.<sup>42</sup>

IDPs represent half of all people in humanitarian need in Syria—see below, section 2.4, page 10.<sup>43</sup>

### Syrian refugees

Refugees first started leaving Syria in large numbers in 2012, with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees recording around 730,000 Syrian refugees in that year. This number grew rapidly to around 5.1 million refugees and asylum seekers in 2015 and has continued to grow in every year since.

**In 2021, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) recorded 6.8 million Syrian refugees and asylum seekers globally.**

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<sup>38</sup> Unicef, [Geneva Palais briefing note on the situation of children in conflict after ten years of conflict](#), 12 March 2021

<sup>39</sup> Unicef, [Geneva Palais briefing note on the situation of children in conflict after ten years of conflict](#), 12 March 2021

<sup>40</sup> World Bank, [The World Bank in Syrian Arab Republic](#), accessed 23 November 2021; UN Refugee Agency, [Syria emergency](#), updated 15 March 2021

<sup>41</sup> UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, [2021 humanitarian needs overview: Syrian Arab Republic](#), 31 March 2021, pp14, 17, 32

<sup>42</sup> UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, [2021 humanitarian needs overview: Syrian Arab Republic](#), 31 March 2021, p14

<sup>43</sup> UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, [2021 humanitarian needs overview: Syrian Arab Republic](#), 31 March 2021, p32



Two thirds of Syrian refugees (4.5 million individuals) live in Turkey and Jordan, with most of those (54% or 3.7 million individuals) residing in Turkey.<sup>44</sup> As of 2021, Jordan was hosting the third largest population of Syrian refugees (670,000), followed by Germany (620,000), and Iraq (250,000).

The UNHCR estimates that [70% of Syrian refugees live in poverty](#).<sup>45</sup> This rises to 80% in Jordan prior to the Covid-19 pandemic (under the poverty line of US\$ 3/day) and 89% of those in Lebanon (who live on less than half the Lebanese minimum wage).<sup>46</sup>

## Syrian refugees in the UK

Since 2014, 29,000 Syrians have been granted asylum or another form of humanitarian protection in the UK.

Around two thirds (20,300) were resettled through the Vulnerable Person Resettlement Scheme (VPRS), a programme set up in 2014 to resettle vulnerable people displaced by the Syrian conflict.<sup>47</sup> A small number of others were resettled during this period via other resettlement schemes. In the six months to June 2021, 232 Syrians were resettled via the new UK Resettlement Scheme and the Community Sponsorship Scheme.<sup>48</sup>

### Syrians granted protection in the UK between 2014 and 2021

Asylum and resettlement figures; main applicants and dependents

	Resettlement		Granted protection through asylum process	Total
	VPRS (all nationalities)	Syrians resettled under other schemes		
2014	143	.	1,423	1,566
2015	1,194	5	2,057	3,256
2016	4,369	1	1,767	6,137
2017	4,832	22	848	5,702
2018	4,407	2	657	5,066
2019	4,408	1	717	5,126
2020	662	.	551	1,213
2021	304	232	578	1,114
<b>Total</b>	<b>20,319</b>	<b>263</b>	<b>8,598</b>	<b>29,180</b>

**Source:** Home Office, [Immigration statistics quarterly, April to June 2021](#), table Asy\_D02

**Note:** VPRS = Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. Includes a handful of non-Syrian nationals who had been displaced by the Syrian conflict.

<sup>44</sup> UNHCR, [Refugee Data Finder](#), accessed 18 November 2021.

<sup>45</sup> USA for UNHCR, [Syria refugee crisis explained](#), accessed 12 November 2021

<sup>46</sup> UNHCR Lebanon, [Nine out of ten Syrian refugee families in Lebanon are now living in extreme poverty](#), 18 December 2020; UNHCR, [Syria emergency](#), accessed 12 November 2021

<sup>47</sup> The VPRS was targeted towards Syrians although in practice some of those resettled under the scheme had other nationalities.

<sup>48</sup> The Library's briefing, [Refugee resettlement in the UK: recent developments](#) provides an explanation of recent changes in resettlement policy.

Between 2014 and June 2021, around 8,600 Syrians were granted asylum or another form of humanitarian protection via the UK’s in-country asylum process.<sup>49</sup> This means they applied for asylum from within the UK, as opposed to being resettled directly from a third country such as Turkey.

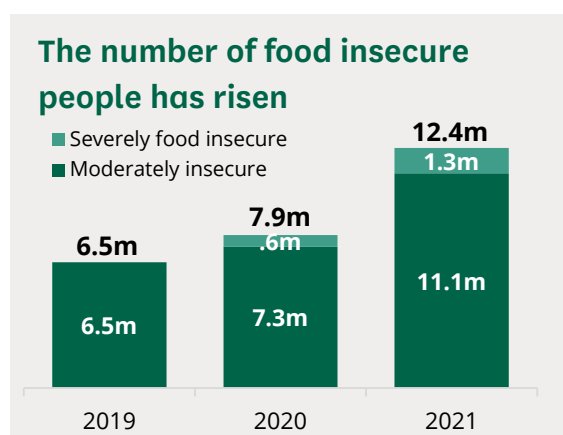
Syrians applying for asylum through the UK’s in-country asylum process had the highest grant rate of any nationality during this period, with 87% of applications being successful at initial decision. The rate for all asylum applications across the period was 40%.<sup>50</sup>

Syrians were the fourth largest nationality in terms of the number of individuals granted protection in the UK between 2014 and 2021, after Iranian, Eritrean, and Sudanese.

## 2.4 Humanitarian needs of the population

The [UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) reports there were **13.4 million in need of humanitarian assistance in 2021**.

People in need			
	In need	In extreme & catastrophic need	Total
2016	4.8m	8.7m	13.5m
2017	7.8m	5.7m	13.5m
2018	7.5m	5.6m	13.1m
2019	6.7m	5.0m	11.7m
2020	6.4m	4.7m	11.1m
2021	7.4m	6.0m	13.4m



Note: The document does not define “in need” or “in extreme and catastrophic need,” but there is a severity classification of five stages ranging from minimal, stress and severe (“in need”) to extreme and catastrophic.

“Food insecure” means individuals are compromising on food quality or variety or reducing the quantity they consume. “Severely food insecure” means they had no food for a day or more during times of the year

Source: UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, [2021 humanitarian needs overview: Syrian Arab Republic](#), 31 March 2021, pp3, 6, 27

This included 2.7 million people in Aleppo and 2.2 million in Idlib. 75% are women and children. 2.3 million of those aged over 12 have a disability.<sup>51</sup>

In 2021, around 12.4 million were food insecure, meaning they are compromising on food quality or variety, or reducing the quantity they

<sup>49</sup> Home Office, [Immigration statistics quarterly, April to June 2021](#), table Asy\_D02

<sup>50</sup> [Ibid.](#)

<sup>51</sup> UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, [2021 humanitarian needs overview: Syrian Arab Republic](#), 31 March 2021, p31

consume. This was a 56% rise from the 7.9 million food insecure people in 2019. This includes **1.3 million who are severely food insecure**, meaning they had no food for a day or more during times of the year.<sup>52</sup>

The UN says rising food insecurity is the result of fuel shortages, high prices, the effect of the coronavirus pandemic, and reduced international trade.<sup>53</sup>

## 2.5 Access to aid and services

In 2014, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted [Resolution 2165 \(2014\)](#), which established four crossing points for UN agencies and humanitarian partners to deliver humanitarian aid, in addition to those already in use.<sup>54</sup>

### Closure of border crossings and reduced humanitarian access

Only one of the four crossings remains open: Bab al-Hawa border on the Turkey-Syrian border, near Idlib. This is one of the few areas still controlled by opposition forces to Assad.<sup>55</sup> At the UN Security Council, Russia and China have blocked the renewal of the other three crossings.<sup>56</sup>

[Humanitarian access](#) is constrained across Syria by continuing conflict:

- 46% of subdistricts are estimated to have mines and unexploded ordnance
- 41% experience military operations that impede humanitarian operations
- 31% see interface in humanitarian work.

Of the 13.4 million in need of assistance, humanitarian agencies face moderate or high access restraints to reach 4.1 million of them (30%).<sup>57</sup>

A total of 531 Syrian and international aid workers have been killed working in the country from September 2011 to July 2021.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, [2021 humanitarian needs overview: Syrian Arab Republic](#), 31 March 2021, pp3, 6, 27; Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN, [Hunger and food insecurity](#), accessed 12 November 2021

<sup>53</sup> UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, [2021 humanitarian needs overview: Syrian Arab Republic](#), 31 March 2021, p27

<sup>54</sup> UN, [With millions of Syrians in need, security Council adopts Resolution 2165 \(2014\)](#), 14 July 2014

<sup>55</sup> UN, [Security Council extends use of border crossing for humanitarian aid to Syria](#), 9 July 2021

<sup>56</sup> Center for Strategic and International Studies, [The implications of the UN cross-border vote in Syria](#), 4 June 2021

<sup>57</sup> UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, [Syria humanitarian access severity overview—August 2021](#), September 2021, pp1,3

<sup>58</sup> Aid Worker Security, [Security incidents: Syria](#), accessed 23 November 2021

## Damage to infrastructure

Syrian infrastructure has also been severely damaged by the conflict. In 2017, the [World Bank](#) estimated that:

- 27% of Syrian's housing stock had been destroyed or damaged (based on a survey of ten cities)
- Half of medical facilities have been damaged, and 16% destroyed (based on a survey of eight governorates)
- 63% of educational facilities have been destroyed or damaged
- Power generation was 62% lower in 2015 compared to 2010.<sup>59</sup>

## 2.6

## Syria's economic crisis

Since 2011, Syria has seen substantial economic disruption. The longer the conflict continues, the greater its long-term impacts on the country's prospects are likely to be, and the higher the costs of reconstruction.

### Rising poverty

- In 2021, the UN estimated 80-90% of the Syrian population lived in poverty.<sup>60</sup>
- In 2017, using different measures, the [World Bank](#) estimated the proportion living in extreme poverty rose from 12% of the population in 2007 to 63% in 2016.<sup>61</sup>
- The war is estimated to have also had negative impacts on Syria's neighbours, pushing up [poverty rates](#) by four percentage points in Jordan, six in Iraq and seven in Lebanon.<sup>62</sup>

### Collapse in GDP and economic activity

- Syria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) [shrank 45%](#) between 2010 and 2019 (measured by official estimates), or by 78%, if the black-market rate is used.<sup>63</sup>
- [Export revenues collapsed](#) from US\$ 11.9 billion in 2010 to US\$ 0.6 billion in 2019.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> World Bank, [The toll of war: The economic and social consequences of the conflict in Syria](#), 2017, ppv and vi

<sup>60</sup> UN Office for Humanitarian Affairs, [Syrian Arab Republic: 2020 humanitarian response plan](#), December 2020, section 1.2; UN, [Amid grim humanitarian situation in Syria, Special Envoy, Briefing Security Council, says constitutional committee must continue its work \[...\]](#), 27 October 2021

<sup>61</sup> World Bank, [The toll of war: The economic and social consequences of the conflict in Syria](#), 2017, pivi, pp12, 71. Extreme poverty is the share of population whose per capita expenditure is less than the cost of food plus expenditure on minimum essential non-food goods.

<sup>62</sup> World Bank, [The fallout of war: The regional consequences of the conflict in Syria](#), September 2020, pp17-18

<sup>63</sup> Harun Onder/World Bank, [A decade of war in Syria: The economic side](#), April 2021, p2

<sup>64</sup> Harun Onder/World Bank, [A decade of war in Syria: The economic side](#), April 2021, p2

- [Economic losses](#) were estimated to total US\$ 442 billion from 2012 to 2020, up from US\$ 260 billion in 2016.<sup>65</sup>
- Inflation is estimated to have been the equivalent of 800% from 2011 to 2019.<sup>66</sup>
- [Unemployment](#) in 2015 was estimated to be 55%, rising to 75% among young people.<sup>67</sup>

#### Weakened government revenues

- The think-tank, [the Atlantic Council](#), estimates Syria's budget has fallen from US\$ 753 per capita in 2010 to US \$227 in 2021.<sup>68</sup>
- Gross public debt is estimated by the IMF to have risen from 30% of GDP in 2010 to 150% in 2015.<sup>69</sup>
- Total government revenues were 83% lower in 2021 compared to 2010.<sup>70</sup>

## 3 The UK and Syria: Key statistics

### 3.1 UK aid

The UK has provided a total of £3.7 billion in official development assistance (ODA) to Syria from 2011 to 2021.<sup>71</sup>

ODA is aid intended to promote the economic development and welfare of developing countries. Such assistance must be reported to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Since 2011, Syria has been one of the largest recipients of UK bilateral ODA in Asia, receiving the fourth-largest amount overall. In 2016, it received the second-highest amount of bilateral ODA among all countries, falling to seventh and eighth place in 2019 and 2020, respectively.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> UN Economic and Social Commission for West Asia, [Losses exceeding \\$442 billion \[...\]](#), September 2020

<sup>66</sup> UN Economic and Social Commission for West Asia, [Syria at war: Eight years on](#), 2020, p65

<sup>67</sup> UN Economic and Social Commission for West Asia, [Syria at war: Five years on](#), 2016, section 1.3.2.

<sup>68</sup> Atlantic Council, [2021 budget reveals the depth of Syria's economic woes](#), 1 December 2020

<sup>69</sup> IMF, [Syria's conflict economy](#), June 2016, p27

<sup>70</sup> Atlantic Council, [2021 budget reveals the depth of Syria's economic woes](#), 1 December 2020

<sup>71</sup> PQ 58739 [[Syria: Overseas aid and sanctions](#)], 22 October 2021

<sup>72</sup> FCDO, [Table 6a. Top 20 country recipients of UK bilateral ODA, 2016, 2019, 2020](#), September 2021

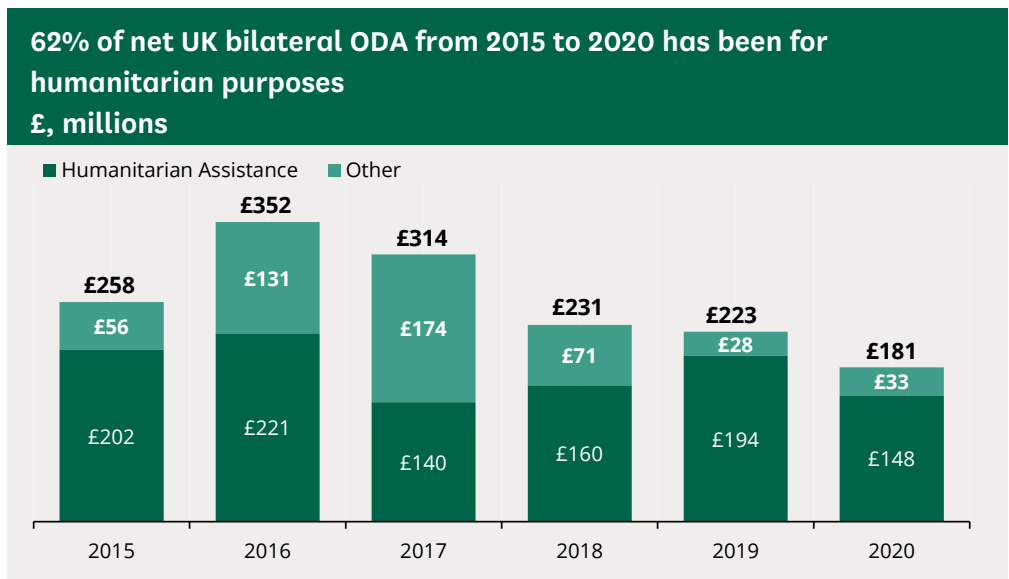
<b>Top 6 recipients of UK bilateral ODA in Asia, 2011-2020</b>											
<b>£ millions, not adjusted for inflation</b>											
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
Pakistan	207	189	338	266	374	463	402	331	305	200	3,075
Afghanistan	264	274	212	198	300	235	227	249	290	226	2,474
Bangladesh	230	196	272	208	164	149	176	190	256	203	2,044
Syria	1	40	139	130	258	352	314	231	223	181	1,868
India	283	292	268	279	186	93	90	95	108	95	1,787
Yemen	39	40	95	82	82	127	205	166	260	221	1,318

Note: Includes bilateral funding only. Does not include multilateral aid—that which is given to multilateral organisations such as the World Bank.

Source: Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), [Table 4AB. Total bilateral ODA by country-Asia](#), September 2021

A list of UK aid projects in Syria can be found at the [FCDO's Development Tracker country page](#).

UK bilateral ODA has been primarily humanitarian in nature in recent years, being highest in 2016, at £221 million. ODA classed as humanitarian assistance involves the provision of material aid (eg, shelter, food) to save lives, alleviate suffering, and maintain human dignity following crises and disasters.<sup>73</sup>



Source: FCDO, [Final aid spending statistics 2020: Table B.2](#), September 2021

<sup>73</sup> FCDO, [Statistics on international development: Annex 1](#), September 2021, p6

## Reduced spending commitments for 2021

In March 2021, the UK Government announced a reduced aid pledge for Syria, of at least £205 million for 2021, compared to £300 million for 2020.<sup>74</sup>

In its September 2021 annual report, the FCDO provided an update, stating it planned to spend £48 million in 2021/22 in bilateral ODA, compared to £153 million in 2020/21.<sup>75</sup> All plans are subject to change and in previous years the government has exceeded its pledges to Syria.<sup>76</sup>

## 3.2

## UK military activity

Since August 2014, the UK has conducted airstrikes in Iraq and Syria against the Islamic State (IS), under Operation Shader, and provided military support to the US-led coalition. Operations in Syria began in December 2015.<sup>77</sup>

As of July 2021, the RAF has flown 8,700 sorties and released 4,300 precision weapons (eg, missiles) to target IS across the region. The UK has also provided training to 120,000 Iraqi and Kurdish personnel.<sup>78</sup>

At the end of 2019/20, there were 1,100 UK military personnel deployed on Operation Shader. This is around 300 personnel less than at the height of UK military deployment in 2017/18.<sup>79</sup>

Around two-thirds of personnel deployed in 2019/20 were working to support the air campaign from the RAF base in Cyprus and in key roles at coalition HQs around the region. The remaining personnel were on the ground in Iraq providing training and military advice. No UK troops have been deployed on the ground in Syria.

## Casualties and fatalities

As of 30 September 2021, one member of the UK armed forces has been killed in action during Operation Shader and three have suffered battle injuries. A further three military personnel died on operation, but not in hostile action.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> PQ 126096 [[Syria: Humanitarian aid](#)], 14 December 2020; PQ 185992 [[Syria: Overseas aid](#)], 27 April 2021

<sup>75</sup> FCDO, [FCDO annual report and accounts 2020 to 2021](#), 22 September 2021, p254

<sup>76</sup> PQ 182099 [[Syria: Overseas aid](#)], 21 April 2021

<sup>77</sup> Ministry of Defence, [Update: Air strikes against Daesh](#), last updated 20 September 2021

<sup>78</sup> HC Deb, [5 July 2021](#), c518

<sup>79</sup> Ministry of Defence, [Annual Report and Accounts 2019 to 2020](#), 22 October 2020, p29; Ministry of Defence, [Annual Report and Accounts 2017 to 2018](#), 20 July 2018, p29

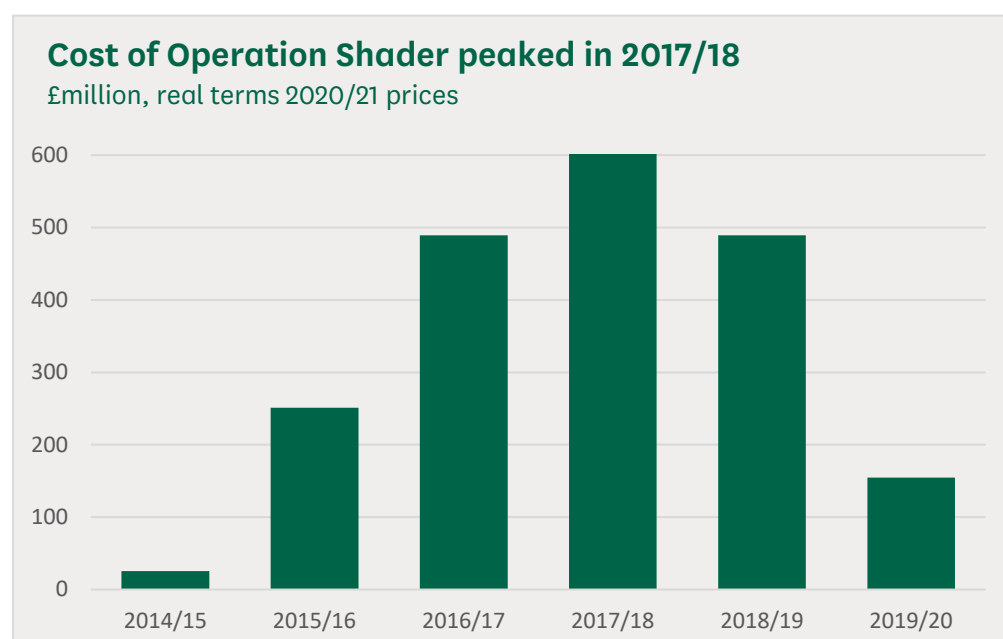
<sup>80</sup> Fatalities recorded as 'died on operation' include accidental deaths, assaults, suicides and deaths as a result of natural causes. Full definitions of terms used to record casualties and fatalities are

All three battle injuries occurred between 1 January and 31 March 2019 and they account for 0.01% of the 303 casualties recorded on Operation Shader from August 2014 to September 2021. All other casualties were either non-battle injuries such as road traffic or sporting accidents or occurred due to natural causes.

The UK has [accepted responsibility](#) for one civilian casualty that occurred during an airstrike in eastern Syria on 26 March 2018. The Government stated that it is currently unaware of any further instances of civilian casualties sustained during Operation Shader but has acknowledged the possibility of their existence.<sup>81</sup>

## Cost of Operation Shader

The most recent figures to 2019/20 show that the cost of Operation Shader has amounted to £2 billion in real terms since 2014. The cost of operations peaked in 2017/18 and has since fallen by around 74%. This fall is largely attributed to a reduction in equipment and infrastructure costs.



Source: Ministry of Defence, [Defence Departmental Resources: 2020](#), 17 August 2021, Table 6b; HM Treasury, [GDP Deflator October 2021](#), 28 October 2021

listed in Ministry of Defence, [UK Armed Forces and UK civilian operations casualty and fatality statistics: financial year 2020/21](#), 11 November 2021, 'notes and definitions'.

<sup>81</sup> PQ 60497 [[Iraq and Syria: Military Intervention](#)], 28 October 2021



## 3.3

## UK Islamic State fighters in Syria/Iraq

Foreigner fighters have fought for several forces in the Syrian conflict, joining, for example, Kurdish forces, mercenary groups, and Islamic State (IS). [UN Resolution 2178 \(2014\)](#) requires states to take steps to prevent and suppress the recruitment and financing of foreign fighters in Syria.<sup>82</sup>

The true numbers of foreign participants are unknown. In 2017, the UN estimated that more than [40,000 foreign fighters](#) from 110 countries travelled to join IS in Iraq and Syria, and that 5,600 from 33 states had returned home.<sup>83</sup> Many remain in Syria, either in custody or at large.<sup>84</sup>

The number of UK citizens who have fought with IS in Iraq and Syria is uncertain—in 2019, the Government estimated they numbered 900.<sup>85</sup>

In 2018, the Government said that of the 900:

- 40 had been prosecuted because of their actions in Syria (4%)
- 180 had been killed (20%)
- 540 had returned to the UK (60%). Note in 2019, the Home Office reported around 400 had returned (44%)
- This implies around 180-320 remained in Syria (20%-36%).<sup>86</sup>

From 2010 to 2019, around 150 individuals were also deprived of their British citizenship for links to terrorism and serious crime.<sup>87</sup> This includes those involved in action beyond IS and Syria/Iraq. The Library briefing, [Returning terrorist fighters](#) (March 2019) has more on policy debates on how to deal with returning fighters and terrorists.

The numbers of UK children taken to Syria and Iraq remains unknown. The Government has undertaken to facilitate their return where feasible, and subject to national security concerns.<sup>88</sup> It hopes that those who have supported IS will be prosecuted in the region.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>82</sup> UN Security Council, [S/RES/2178 \(2014\)](#), September 2014

<sup>83</sup> UN, [Greater cooperation needed to tackle danger posed by returning foreign fighters](#), 28 November 2017

<sup>84</sup> BBC News, [How many IS foreign fighters are left in Iraq and Syria?](#), 20 February 2019

<sup>85</sup> HC Deb, [UK nationals returning from Syria, 18 February 2019](#), c1193

<sup>86</sup> BBC News, [Shamima Begun, How do countries deal with people returning from IS?](#), 15 February 2019; HC Deb, [Counter-terrorism and border security bill, 11 June 2018](#), c666; Home Office, [Counter-terrorism strategy \(CONTEST\) 2018](#), August 2018, p18

<sup>87</sup> HC Deb, [Deprivation of citizenship status](#), 20 February 2019, c1486

<sup>88</sup> PQ HL9985 [[Syria: Migrant camps](#)], 16 November 2020

<sup>89</sup> HC Deb, [4 March 2021](#), c411

## 4

# Further resources/reading

## Timelines

- US Institute for Peace, [Syria timeline: Since the uprising against Assad](#)
- Wilson Center, [The rise, spread and fall of the Islamic State](#)
- Arms Control, [Timeline of Syrian chemical weapons activity](#), 2012-2021

## Regularly updated resources

- Council on Foreign Relations, [Syria](#)
- Council on Foreign Relations, [Civil war in Syria](#)
- International Crisis Group, [Crisis Watch: Syria](#)
- ACAPS, [Syria](#)
- UK Ministry of Defence, [Update: Air strikes against Daesh](#)
- US Department of Defence Office of Inspector General, [Lead Inspector General reports on Operation Inherent Resolve](#) [US operations in Syria and Iraq against IS/Daesh]. Provides quarterly reports on the situation.
- UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, [Syrian Arab Republic](#)
- UN Human Rights Council, [Independent International Commission for the Syrian Arab Republic](#)

## Maps of the conflict

- ACLED, [The state of Syria](#) (regularly updated)
- World Food Programme, [Syria maps](#) (includes maps on humanitarian access and military control)

## UN and World Bank Reports

- UN Economic and Social Commission for West Asia, [Syria at war: Eight years on](#), 2020
- UN Economic and Social Commission for West Asia, [An examination of the policy-based gaps in the Syrian Arab Republic's peacebuilding process](#), 2020
- UN Refugee Agency, [Syria end of year reports](#), 2014-2020
- World Bank, [The Toll of war: The economic and social consequences of the conflict on Syria](#), 2017

## UK Parliament committee reports on UK policy towards Syria

- [HC] Defence Select Committee, [UK military operations in Mosul and Raqqa inquiry](#), 2018

- [HC] Foreign Affairs Committee, [Kurdish aspirations and the interests of the UK inquiry](#), 2018
- [HC] Foreign Affairs Committee, [UK policy on Syria inquiry](#), 2017
- [HC] Defence Select Committee, [UK military operations in Syria](#), 2016
- [HL] International Relations and Defence Committee, [Transformation of power in the Middle East and implications for UK policy inquiry](#), May 2017
- [HC] Defence Select Committee, [The situation in Iraq and Syria](#), 2015
- [HC/HL] Joint Committee on Human Rights, [Government's policy on use of drones for targeted killing](#), 2015
- [HL] Constitution Committee, [Constitutional arrangements for the use of armed force](#), 2013

## UK Parliament committee and ICAI reports on Syrian refugees and UK aid

- [HC] International Development Committee, [Humanitarian situation in Syria inquiry](#), 2019
- [HC] International Development Committee, [Follow-up on Yemen, Syria, Israel and Occupied Territories inquiry](#), 2019
- Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI), [Report: The UK's humanitarian support to Syria](#), 2018
- [HC] International Development Committee, [Syrian refugee crisis: Follow-up](#), 2017
- [HC] International Development Committee, [Syrian refugee crisis](#), 2016
- Independent Commission for Aid Impact, [The UK's aid response to irregular migration in the central Mediterranean](#), 2017
- [HC] International Development Committee, [The crisis in Syria](#), 2013

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