

Research Briefing

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The Syrian civil war: timeline, UK aid and statistics

Summary	2
1 Military control, early December 2024	4
2 Military control, after Assad	5
3 Timeline of key events	6
4 The Syrian civil war in numbers	16
4.1 Casualties and missing people	16
4.2 Refugees and displaced people	17
4.3 Humanitarian needs of the population	17
4.4 Aid access to Syria	18
4.5 Syria's deteriorating economy and revenues	19
4.6 Islamic State/Daesh	21
5 The UK and Syria: key statistics	23
5.1 UK aid	23
5.2 UK foreign fighters in Syria	25
5.3 UK military activity	26
6 Further resources/reading	29

Summary

It is more than 13 years since the first anti-government protests in Syria began in 2011. President Bashar al-Assad had been widely considered as likely to remain in power following the intervention of Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah in support. As of November 2024, he held around 60% to 70% of Syrian territory and had been strengthened internationally by the [Arab League re-admitting Syria as a member](#) in 2023. Syria had been suspended in 2011.

In 2024, the [most extensive armed violence and change in military control for several years occurred](#). Syria has been affected by the [conflicts between Israel, Hezbollah, and Iran](#). In December 2024 President Assad lost Syria's second city, Aleppo, to non-government groups including [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham](#) (HTS, a proscribed terrorist group in the UK). Days later, opposition forces entered Damascus and [President Assad left Syria, reportedly being given asylum in Russia](#). A [transitional government](#) has been announced.

This research briefing provides a timeline of main events, statistics on the humanitarian and economic effects of the war, UK military actions against Islamic State/Daesh and UK humanitarian aid for Syria, and a list of further reading and regularly updated resources on the conflict.

The Library research briefing, [Syria's civil war in 2023: Syria back in the Arab League](#) provides background on the conflict, the Assad government, the role of foreign powers in Syria, and peace talks, as of June 2023. The research briefing, [Syria after Assad 2024/25: Consequences and next steps](#) provides information on the situation after his fall in December 2024.

Humanitarian need in Syria

In March 2024, the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) estimated that [16.7 million people in Syria were expected to require humanitarian assistance](#), the highest since 2011 and representing 71% of the population. This included 3.5 million people in Aleppo and 2.6 million in Idlib. UNOCHA also estimated that 12.9 million people are food insecure. The price of a standard food basket was 133 times higher in 2023 than in 2013.

There has been substantial economic disruption. In 2024 the World Bank said [the Syrian economy shrank 54% from 2010 to 2021](#) and Assad government expenditure was 87% lower in 2023 compared with 2010, with reductions in social security and food and gas subsidies.

The World Bank also said [trade in the drug captagon](#) was possibly the “most valuable sector in Syria's economy”, with an annual market of US\$5.6 billion. The Assad government was [considered the major producer and beneficiary of the trade](#), which affects neighbouring states.

UK humanitarian aid

The UK has provided [£4.3 billion in aid](#) to Syria from 2011 to 2024. [Bilateral aid to Syria](#) peaked in 2016 at £352 million. Reflecting the [reduction in UK aid spending from 0.7% to 0.5% of gross national income](#), UK aid to Syria fell each year from 2019 to 2022, before rising in 2023. The budgeted spend by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is [£97 million in 2024/25](#). In December, the government announced funding for the [Syrian white helmets](#), for [displaced and vulnerable Syrians](#), and [refugees in Lebanon and Jordan](#).

UK military action against Islamic State/Daesh

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

The [global coalition against Islamic State in Iraq will end by September 2025](#), which will affect operations in Syria. The UK and US will develop bilateral defence relations with Iraq going forward. As of September 2024, the [RAF have flown 10,000 sorties](#) against Islamic State, striking 1,400 targets and also providing surveillance and reconnaissance operations. The UK has given training to 111,000 members of the Iraqi and Kurdish security forces.

As of 31 March 2023, [one member of the UK Armed Forces has been killed in action](#) during Operation Shader and three have suffered battle injuries. A further five military personnel died during the operations, but not in hostile action. The most recent figures to 2021/22 show that the [total cost of Operation Shader has amounted to £2.5 billion](#) in real terms (2022/23 prices) since 2014. The cost of the operations peaked in 2017/18.

Islamic State fighters in Syria and Iraq

In July 2024 the US Central Command warned [that Islamic State was “on pace to more than double the total number of attacks”](#) it claimed in Iraq and Syria in 2023, with 153 claimed attacks from January to June 2024. It estimated around 2,500 Islamic State fighters remained at large across Iraq and Syria and 9,000 remained in detention facilities, including in northeastern Syria.

In 2017, the UN estimated more than [40,000 foreign fighters](#) from 110 countries travelled to join Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. [Many remain in Syria, either in custody or at large](#). The number of UK citizens who have fought is uncertain – in 2019, [the government estimated they numbered 900](#). An estimated 540 had returned, with 180 to 320 remaining in Syria.

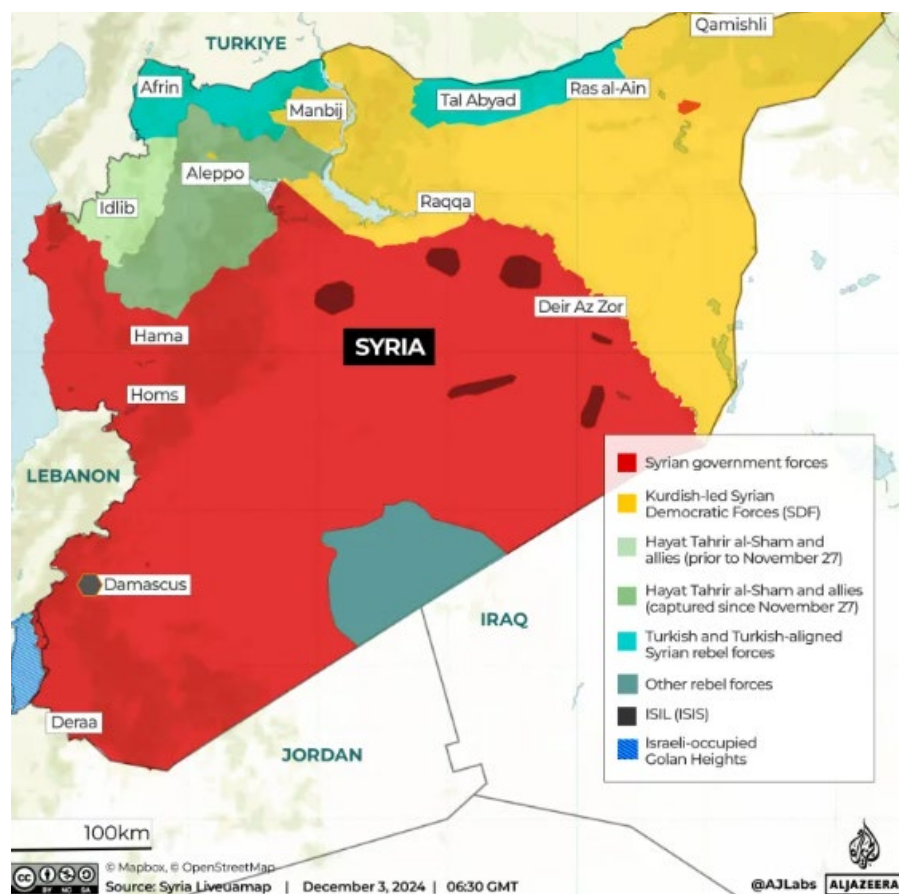
1 Military control, early December 2024

There are six foreign actors present in Syria:

- [Iran](#), [Lebanese Hezbollah](#), and [Russia](#), which all backed President Assad
- Israel, which is targeting Hezbollah and Iran
- the [United States](#), with troops in the northeast to combat Islamic State/Daesh
- [Turkey](#), which is targeting the Kurdish-led [Syrian Democratic Forces](#) in Syria and the [Kurdistan Workers' Party](#) (PKK) in Turkey.¹

As of mid-2024, Assad Government forces and their allies (shown in red on the below map), controlled 65% to 70% of Syria, including the capital Damascus.

The second largest area (20% to 25% of Syria) was held by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), in the north east. Around 900 US personnel are also based there. The other major zone in Syria outside Assad Government control was dominated by [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham](#), a UK-proscribed terrorist group with origins in Al-Qaeda. It was centred in Idlib province in northwestern Syria. [Islamic State](#) also continues to mount local attacks.



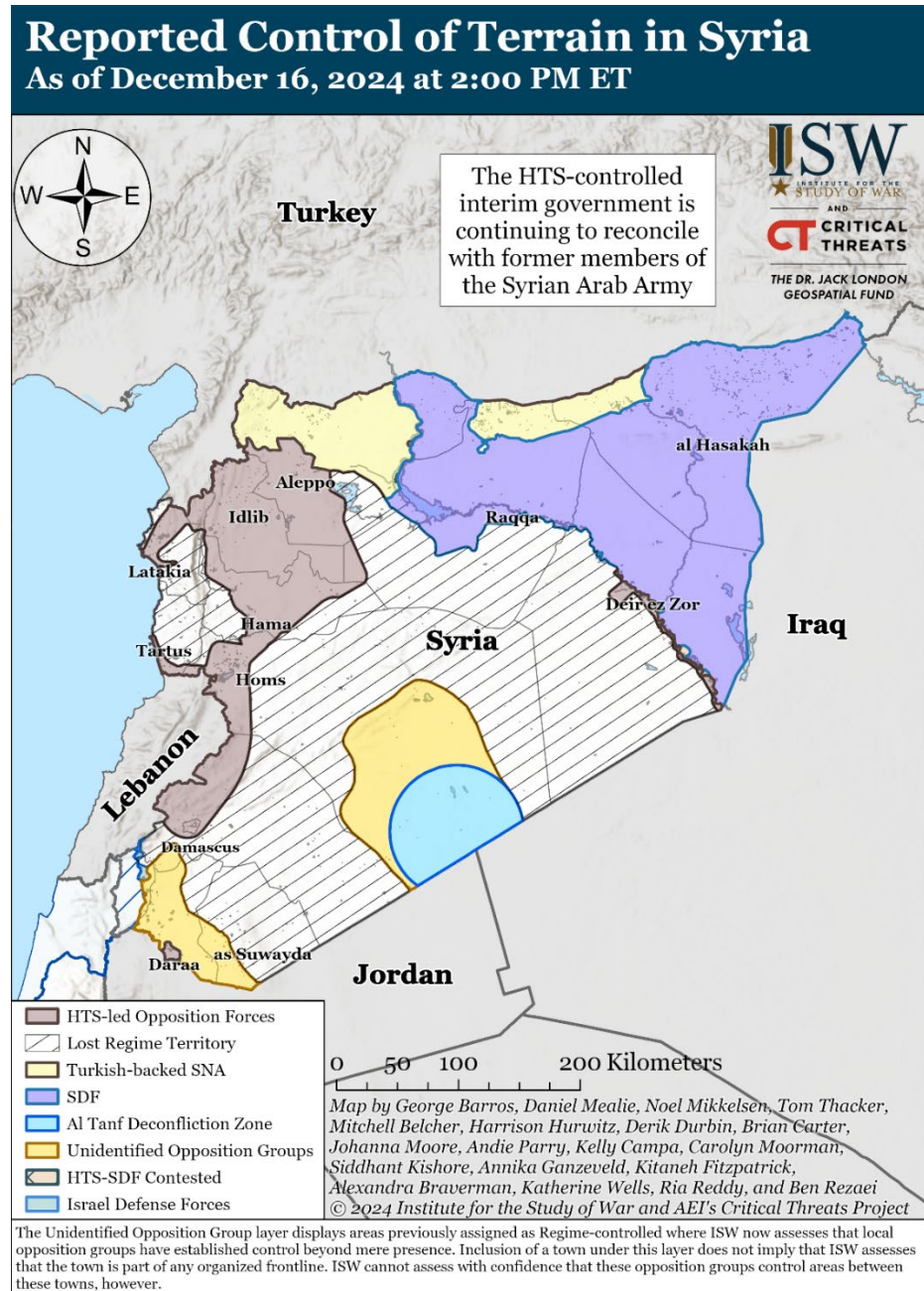
Source: [Who controls what in Syria](#), Al-Jazeera, 3 December 2024. [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#)/image cropped. Note that Islamic State/Daesh (ISIS) has held no territory in Syria since 2019.

¹ See Commons Library, [Assad back in the Arab League](#), sections 1 and 2, for details.

2

Military control, after Assad

While Assad has fallen, the Syrian opposition is not united, and the country continues to be divided between different armed groups. The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have withdrawn from some territories following action by the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The HTS have formed a transitional government.



Source: Institute for the Study of War, [Iran update](#), 16 December 2024. © Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project. See updated maps on the [Institute's website](#).

3

Timeline of key events

2011

2011: Protests against Assad and 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.²

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.³ In August, the US, UK, and others called for President Assad to stand down. Syria was suspended from the Arab League in November.

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

2012

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.⁴

[Iran increased support to Assad](#), providing military advisors and helping found pro-government militias, such as the National Defence Forces.⁵

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

In 2012, the number of Syrian refugees displaced by the conflict reached 500,000. By March 2013, they numbered 1 million, and by September 2013, 2 million.⁶

² Council for Foreign Relations, [Syria's civil war: the descent into horror](#), 17 March 2021

³ Council for Foreign Relations, [The Arab League](#), updated 25 May 2023

⁴ [Syria in civil war, UN official says](#), Reuters, 12 June 2012

⁵ Institute for the Study of War, [Iranian strategy in Syria](#), 2013, pp6, 20

⁶ UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), [Syria: factsheet, Timeline and figures \(PDF\)](#), undated, p1

2013

2013: Emergence of Islamic State

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

Islamic State/Daesh emerged in eastern Syria and Western Iraq in 2013. Over several months, the group established control over large parts of both countries. At its height, it held around a third of Syria and 40% of Iraq. By December 2017, [it lost 95% of its territory](#), including its nominal capital, [Raqqa in Syria](#). It remains active in both states.⁷

The Library briefings, [Military forces in Syria and the rise of the Jihadis](#) (April 2013) and [Daesh: what now for the military campaign?](#) (July 2018) have more.

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.⁸ The US said the Syrian Government was to blame.⁹ President Assad agreed to hand over his remaining chemical weapons; he completed this process for the weapons he had declared by June 2014.¹⁰

In August, [the House of Commons voted against joint military action](#) with the US against President Assad, in response to his alleged use of chemical weapons.¹¹

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

2014

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. Participants included Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar.¹²

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

⁷ [Islamic State and the crisis in Iraq and Syria in maps](#), BBC News, March 2018; Wilson Center, [The rise, spread and fall of the Islamic state](#), October 2019; US Centcom, [Defeat ISIS mission](#), June 2024

⁸ [Syria chemical attack: What we know](#), BBC News, 24 September 2013

⁹ White House, [Government assessment of the Syrian Government's use of chemical weapons on 21 August 2013](#), 30 August 2013

¹⁰ [Syria hands over remaining chemical weapons for destruction](#), Reuters, 23 June 2014

¹¹ UK Parliament, [House of Commons debate on Syria](#), 30 August 2013

¹² [US confirms 14 airstrikes against IS in Syria](#), The Guardian, 23 September 2014

[China and Russia voted against a draft resolution at the UN Security Council](#) to refer Syria to the International Criminal Court to hold President Assad accountable for potential war crimes and human rights violations.¹³

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) has more.

2015

2015: Russia launches military campaign in support of Assad

In 2015, Russia, which had previously provided weapons and diplomatic support to President Assad, launched its own military campaign. This involved deploying Russian ground troops and conducting 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 President Assad's favour.¹⁴

[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.¹⁵ The constitutional committee first met in 2019.

The resolution remains in place. It also calls for a "Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition", for the territorial integrity of Syria to be maintained, and for free and fair elections to be held, under UN supervision.

2015: UK extends campaign against Islamic State to Syria

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 4 million in 2015.¹⁶ Described as a "refugee crisis" by the UN, there were 1.3 million asylum claims in the EU that year. Most were from conflict-afflicted areas in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan.¹⁷

¹³ UN, [Referral of Syria to International Criminal Court fails \[...\]](#), 22 May 2014

¹⁴ RAND, [Understanding Russia's intervention in Syria](#), 2019; US Institute for Peace (USIP), [What is Russia's endgame in Syria?](#), 16 February 2021; [What has Russia gained from five years of fighting in Syria?](#), Al-Jazeera, 1 October 2020

¹⁵ UN, [Security Council unanimously adopts Resolution 2254 \(2015\)](#), 18 December 2015

¹⁶ UNHCR, [Total number of Syrian refugees exceeds four million](#), 9 July 2015

¹⁷ UNHCR, [2015: the year of Europe's refugee crisis](#), 8 December 2015; [Migrant crisis: migration to Europe explained in seven charts](#), BBC News, 4 March 2016

2016

2016: Turkish military enter Syria

In August 2016, Turkish forces intervened militarily in northern Syria, targeting Islamic State and some Kurdish forces. As a result of five military operations from 2016 to 2022, Turkey-backed forces hold parts of northern Syria.¹⁸

The Syrian Government also recaptured areas of Syria's second city, Aleppo, which had been held by rebel forces since 2012.¹⁹ Some analysts saw this as a turning point in the war against the Syrian rebels.²⁰

2017

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.²¹

As part of the Astana talks, the countries agreed to establish four “de-escalation areas” in Syria to allow for the cessation of hostilities.²² Three of the four areas were later taken by Syrian Government forces.²³

The US attacked an Assad government airfield following a reported sarin gas attack.²⁴

The nominal Islamic State capital, Raqqa, was recaptured by Assad government forces in October. By November, the group had [lost 95% of the territory](#) it once held.²⁵

¹⁸ [Turkey's military operations in Iraq and Syria](#), Reuters, 21 November 2022

¹⁹ [Syria's government recaptures all of Aleppo city](#), Al-Jazeera, 22 December 2016

²⁰ Carnegie Middle East Center, [A turning point in Aleppo](#), 1 December 2016; Chatham House, [Western policy towards Syria: applying lessons learned](#), 15 March 2017

²¹ [Syria conflict: ceasefire agreed, backed by Russia and Turkey](#), BBC News, 29 December 2016; [Syria talks to begin in Astana as ceasefire holds](#), Al-Jazeera, 22 January 2017

²² Atlantic Council, [How the “de-escalation zone” plan benefits Syria's foreign players](#), 23 May 2017

²³ Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, [De-escalation zones in Syria](#), 3 June 2020

²⁴ [Syria war: Why was Shayrat airbase bombed?](#), BBC News, 7 April 2017

²⁵ [IS loses Deir al-Zour in Syria and al-Qaim in Iraq on same day](#), BBC News, 3 November 2017

2018

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

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

The Library briefing, [Chemical weapons and Syria](#) (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.²⁶

2019

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, 2021 and 2022 failed to make progress.²⁷

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.²⁸ The briefing [Syria: US withdrawal and Turkish incursion](#) (October 2019), provides more information.

2020

2020: March ceasefire in Idlib agreed. Areas of control change little until 2024

In March 2020, Turkey and Russia agreed a ceasefire over Idlib, an area held by several opposition groups. This followed several weeks of fighting in the province. The ceasefire has largely held.²⁹

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

The international affairs think tank Chatham House estimated that [President Assad held around 65% to 70% of Syria](#) by 2020.³⁰

²⁶ [Trump pulling out all US troops from Syria, declaring IS defeat](#), AP News, 19 December 2018

²⁷ Middle East Institute, [Syria's constitutional committee: the devil in the detail](#), 6 January 2021; UN, [Syria's "relative calm" not seized upon to build credible political process \[...\]](#), 29 August 2022

²⁸ USIP, [A month after US withdrawal, what is the state of play in Syria?](#), 7 November 2019

²⁹ International Crisis Group, [Silencing the guns in Syria's Idlib](#), 14 May 2020

³⁰ Chatham House, [Assessing control and power dynamics in Syria](#), 13 November 2020

2021

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

In 2021 there were continued peace talks and an attempt to draft a new constitution.

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

There was intense fighting in mid-2021 in Daraa, an area in the south nominally held by the Assad regime, following the region's boycotting of the presidential election. A ceasefire, likely brokered by Russia, was agreed in September.³¹

2022

2022: Islamic State attacks reported but overall balance unchanged

In 2022, the military balance remained unchanged.

In January, Islamic State mounted a significant attack against Hasakah prison in north-east Syria. The attack continued for 10 days. An estimated 500 people were killed, and some fighters escaped detention.³²

Regional re-engagement with President Assad continued: Bahrain, the UAE and Turkey all took steps to strengthen relations in 2022.³³

2023

2023: earthquakes in February

In February 2023, two earthquakes and a series of aftershocks hit Syria and south-east Turkey. More than 55,000 people were killed, including 4,400 people in north-west Syria. The earthquakes exacerbated the high level of humanitarian need in the region, with 84% of the 4.1 million population already dependent on aid.³⁴

³¹ [Syrian army enters opposition bastion](#), France 24, 9 September 2021

³² USIP, [Al-Hol: displacement crisis is a tinderbox that could ignite ISIS 2.0](#), 11 May 2022

³³ [Syria's leader makes historic visit to UAE](#), BBC News, 9 March 2022; [Syria-Bahrain ties continue to develop \[...\]](#), Al-Monitor, 27 June 2022; [Erdogan eyes reset with Syria](#), VOA, 23 August 2022

³⁴ Commons Library, [Earthquakes in Syria and Turkey: February 2023](#), updated 15 February 2023

2023

2023: Assad rejoins Arab League but some protests in Syria

Building on the increasing re-engagement of Arab states with President Assad, in May 2023 the Arab League re-admitted Syria as a member. The US, UK, and EU opposed the decision. Russia has also been encouraging Turkey and Syria to re-establish ties to maintain stability, though Assad has called for Turkish troops to first be withdrawn from Syria.

Section 3 of the Library briefing, [Syria's civil war in 2023: Assad back in the Arab League](#), provides analysis on the regional reconciliation that occurred with Assad, and continuing US and UK sanctions against him.

The most substantial violence between Iranian-aligned forces and US forces for several years also took place in early 2023. In March, a US contractor was killed following a drone attack by Iran-aligned groups. In response, the US conducted retaliatory air strikes, killing a reported 19 people.³⁵

Protests against President Assad were held in some parts of government-controlled southern Syria in August and early September 2023, centred on the [Druze minority](#) and primarily motivated by the deteriorating economic situation in Syria (see section 4.5 of this briefing). The Assad government applied a mixture of force and economic measures to counter the protests.³⁶ Some of these protests continued into 2024.³⁷

2023: Assad visits China

In September 2023, President Assad was invited to China, where the two countries announced a strategic partnership and cooperation agreements on [China's belt and road initiative](#) to help Syria's economy recover from the conflict. This was a further sign Assad's diplomatic isolation was decreasing.³⁸

2023/24: Syria impacted by the Israel-Hamas conflict

In 2024 the UN's special envoy for Syria warned that [wider regional tensions and conflict](#) between Israel, Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, and others in 2023/24 risked destabilising Syria further.³⁹ President Assad is a long-standing ally of Iran, and Lebanese Hezbollah also provided support to his government. Hamas was hosted in the country until 2012, but the group refused to back Assad in the early stages of the conflict and its leadership left Syria. Ties between President Assad and Hamas were restored in 2022. In 2023/24,

³⁵ [Attacks on Iran-linked bases in Syria will draw swift response, spokesperson says](#), Reuters, 25 March 2023

³⁶ [Syria protests: new revolution or economic issue?](#), DW, 28 August 2023 and [Will Assad resort to violence as Suwayda protests grow?](#), Al-Monitor, 30 August 2023

³⁷ Washington Institute, [A year of Suwayda protests show that Assad is no partner](#), 16 August 2024

³⁸ [Syria's Assad and Kuwaiti Crown Prince in China](#), Al-Monitor, 22 September 2023 and [China to help reconstruct war-battered Syria](#), Al-Jazeera, 22 September 2023

³⁹ UN, [UN special envoy warns of escalation risk in Syria](#), 22 July 2024

neither Israel nor President Assad have sought a direct conflict with each other.⁴⁰

Iran and Hezbollah have long used Syria as a conduit to smuggle arms into Lebanon to threaten Israel, and to train and deploy fighters,⁴¹ and Israel has launched air strikes in Syria targeting the two groups since 2013. The Armed Conflict and Location Event Database (ACLED) reports that in the year from October 2023 there were 220 Israeli shelling and aerial attacks on Syrian territory, twice the level of the previous year.⁴²

In 2024 Israeli military action weakened the leadership and military strength of both Iran's [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#), which works overseas in countries including Syria, and [Lebanese Hezbollah](#).⁴³

2024

2024: Talks between Turkey and Assad on restoring relations and wider engagement

Regional reconciliation with President Assad continued in 2024, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE appointing their first envoys to Syria since 2012.⁴⁴ Italy also established a diplomatic presence, which some saw as part of an attempt by some European states to arrange the return of Syrian refugees to the country.⁴⁵

In 2024 talks also continued between Turkey and Syria, brokered by Russia and Iraq, on restoring diplomatic ties. Turkey was asking President Assad to take steps to contain Kurdish-led groups that it views as linked to the PKK in Turkey and to allow for the return of Syrian refugees. President Assad asked Turkey to withdraw its forces and support for armed groups in the country.⁴⁶

On 21 November 2024 the UN deputy special envoy for Syria reported that the conflict in Syria was “on track to be the most violent since 2020”, citing military action by Israel, Hezbollah, and Iran.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ This and next paragraph based on [Iran ally Syria strives to stay out of Gaza war](#), France 24, 26 April 2024; Stimson, [Why Syria is so silent about Hamas](#), 19 March 2024

⁴¹ [IDF details years long efforts against Hezbollah arms smuggling](#), Times of Israel, 26 November 2024; Counter Terrorism Sentinel, [Hezbollah's procurement channels](#) (PDF), March 2019

⁴² ACLED, [Understanding Israeli operations in Lebanon and the escalation of the Middle East crisis](#), 4 October 2024

⁴³ [IDF estimates it killed 3,500 Hezbollah operatives](#), Times of Israel, 28 November 2024; ACLED, [Israel's assassinations outside Palestine](#), 1 August 2024. Israel has neither confirmed nor denied any participation in the deaths of several Hamas, Hezbollah the IRGC officials.

⁴⁴ [Saudi Arabia appoints first envoy to Syria in more than a decade](#), Reuters, 26 May 2024; [UAE ambassador to Syria takes post in Damascus after nearly 13 years](#), AP News, 31 January 2024

⁴⁵ [Italy returns to Damascus](#), Le Monde, 31 July 2024; [Europe considers stepping up engage with Syria](#), FT, 30 October 2024

⁴⁶ [What hurdles face Syria normalisation?](#), BBC Monitoring, 16 July 2024

⁴⁷ UN, [Most violent year for Syria since 2020 \[...\]](#), 21 November 2024

2024

November 2024: HTS captures Aleppo

On 26 November [Hayat Tahrir al-Sham \(HTS\)](#), a group with origins in A-Qaeda that has been proscribed as a terrorist organisation by the UN Security Council,⁴⁸ launched an offensive from Idlib, where it has been the dominant non-government group. It captured Aleppo, Syria's second city. This was the first time since 2016 that opposition forces have had a presence in the city.

HTS is not without opposition in Idlib, with recurrent protests in recent years.⁴⁹ It has also faced opposition from other armed and terrorist groups in the area, which it has increasingly contained in order to take greater control.⁵⁰

The Turkish-backed alliance, the Syrian National Army (SNA) which also controls parts of Idlib province on the Turkish border and is sometimes in conflict with HTS, also launched attacks around Aleppo and on the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in November/December 2024.⁵¹ Local unidentified opposition groups also seized areas from Assad government forces in southern Syria.⁵²

December 2024: Assad leaves to Russia. Transitional government announced, led by HTS

After taking Aleppo and Hama, opposition forces soon entered Damascus. On 8 December the Russian Foreign Ministry said that Assad had decided to resign the presidency and had left the country. Russian media reported that Assad had been granted asylum in Russia.⁵³ Russia has major military facilities in Syria at Hmeimim Air Base and a naval base at Tartus. Their status is uncertain.⁵⁴

A transitional government was announced in December, constituted of HTS members. It is intended to be in place until March 2025.⁵⁵ HTS, the SNA and SDF also remained in tension over control of Syrian territory.⁵⁶

The UK and other governments said they would consider their approach towards HTS, based on its actions, including the protection of women and minority groups. Both the US and UK also reiterated their support for the SDF against Islamic State/Daesh. The UK, EU and UK were in contact with HTS.⁵⁷

⁴⁸ For background, see Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), [Terrorism backgrounder: Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham \(HTS\)](#), 2018 and ACLED, [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham \(HTS\)](#), 25 July 2023 and European Council on Foreign Relations, [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham \(Syria\)](#), 10 November 2020; UN Security Council, [Consolidated list: Qe.De.137](#), as of 5 December 2024

⁴⁹ [Protests grow against powerful Jihadist group in Syria enclave](#), VoA, 7 March 2024; [Syrian protesters rise up against Islamists in Idlib](#), DW, 25 May 2024

⁵⁰ [HTS makes rival jihadis in Syria's Idlib \[...\] give up weapons](#), Al Monitor, 20 November 2021

⁵¹ [Kurdish dream of self-rule under Turkish-backed forces across Syria](#), France 24, 5 December 2024

⁵² [Anti-Assad rebels take most of key southern region—reports](#), BBC News, 6 December 2024

⁵³ [Assad in Moscow](#), TASS, 8 December 2024

⁵⁴ Institute for the Study of War, [Syria's potential impact on Russia's \[...\] ambitions](#), 4 December 2024

⁵⁵ [Rebel-backed figure takes charge \[...\]](#), Reuters, 10 December 2024

⁵⁶ Commons Library research briefing, [Syria after Assad 2024/25](#), section 2

⁵⁷ FCDO, [Joint statement on Syria](#), 14 December 2024; HC Deb, [9 December 2024](#), c702

December 204: Israeli actions in Syria

In December Israel launched air strikes against former Assad military assets and chemical weapons facilities and said it took “temporary” control of the Syria-Israel buffer zone. It also announced an expansion of settlements in the occupied Golan Heights, citing defensive needs.⁵⁸

The Commons Library research briefing, [Syria after Assad 2024/25: consequences and next steps](#), describes the situation for domestic and foreign actors in Syria after Assad.

⁵⁸ [Israel plans to double population on occupied Golan](#), Reuters, 15 December 2024; [Israeli army prepares to stay on border peak of Mt Hermon for winter](#), BBC News, 13 December 2024

4 The Syrian civil war in numbers

4.1 Casualties and missing people

Casualties

Because of issues in recording, access, and incompleteness in the information available about the Syrian civil war, it is unlikely the true figure of those killed and injured will ever be known.

In June 2022, the UN Human Rights Office published estimates on the number of civilians killed in Syria. It documented 350,209 deaths directly from the conflict, of which 143,350 were civilians. It estimated there were a further 163,537 civilian deaths, bringing the civilian death total to 306,887 from March 2011 and March 2021. Among them, 1 in 13 documented deaths were women, and 1 in 13 were children.⁵⁹

In 2021 the UK-based 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.⁶⁰

Using [different methodology](#), the Uppsala Conflict Data Program estimates a total of 409,000 deaths due to violence in Syria from 2011 to 2023.⁶¹

The SOHR estimated 2.1 million civilians have been injured or made permanently disabled because of the conflict.⁶² In 2016, the World Health Organization said 1.5 million people had been injured since the crisis began.⁶³

Missing people

In 2019, the UN said reports suggested that more than 100,000 people had gone missing since the start of the conflict, “largely, but not only, because of the Syrian government”.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ 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 and [Presentation of the report on civilian deaths in the Syrian Arab Republic](#), 30 June 2022

⁶⁰ SOHR, [Total death toll. Over 606,000 people killed across Syria \[...\]](#), 1 June 2021

⁶¹ Uppsala Conflict Data Programme, [Organised violence, Syria](#), accessed 6 December 2024

⁶² SOHR, [Total death toll. Over 606,000 people killed across Syria \[...\]](#), 1 June 2021

⁶³ WHO, [Syrian Arab Republic: annual report 2016 \(PDF\)](#), 2016, p8

⁶⁴ UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, [Security Council briefing on detainees and missing persons in Syria](#), 7 August 2019

In 2021, a report to the UN said the whereabouts of “tens of thousands” of those detained remained unknown.⁶⁵

4.2 Refugees and displaced people

Internally displaced people

There are an estimated 7.2 million displaced people within Syria, as of July 2023. This represents around 30% of the population. Around 87% of displaced people live in urban areas, with the remainder in what were intended to be temporary or “last resort” camps. The largest numbers of displaced people are in Idlib province (2.1 million) and Aleppo (1.6 million).⁶⁶

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 4.9 million refugees in 2015.⁶⁷

In November 2024, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) recorded 4.8 million Syrian refugees and asylum seekers registered in the region. Around 2.9 million refugees were in Turkey (61%), and 768,000 in Lebanon (16%). Jordan was hosting the third largest population of Syrian refugees in the region (620,000, 13%), followed by Iraq (299,000, 6%).⁶⁸ During the Israel-Hezbollah conflict, in September to October 2024 an estimated 469,000 refugees crossed from Lebanon to Syria. An estimated 71% were Syrians.⁶⁹

4.3 Humanitarian needs of the population

In March 2024, the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) estimated that 16.7 million people were expected to require humanitarian assistance in 2024, the highest since 2011 and representing 71% of the population. This included 3.5 million in Aleppo and 2.6 million in Idlib.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ UN Human Rights Council, [Report of the independent international commission of inquiry into the Syrian Arab Republic](#), 11 March 2021, p9

⁶⁶ UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), [Syrian Arab Republic: 2024 humanitarian need overview](#), March 2024, pp9, 43, 45 and UNHCR, [Country: Syria](#), accessed 6 December 2024

⁶⁷ UNHCR, [Global trends: forced displacement 2015](#) (PDF)

⁶⁸ UNHCR, [Operational data portal](#), accessed 6 December 2024

⁶⁹ UNHCR, [Response to displacement from Lebanon to Syria](#), 31 October 2024

⁷⁰ UNOCHA, [Syrian Arab Republic: 2024 humanitarian need overview](#), 3 March 2024, pp3, 6, 7

Humanitarian need was exacerbated by the [February 2023 earthquakes](#), which killed more than 6,000 people and injured around 12,800 people across Syria; displacement of civilians from Lebanon as a result of the [Israel-Hezbollah conflict in 2023/24](#); and Israeli strikes on Hezbollah and IRGC sites in Syria linked to attacks on Israel in 2023/24.⁷¹

UNOCHA also estimates that 12.9 million people are food insecure (around half the population, and meaning they have irregular or insufficient supplies). Wheat production in Syria was around 46% below the pre-2011 average, and the price of a standard food basket has risen from (in Syrian pounds) £7,001 in 2013 to £928,620 in October 2023, presenting 77% of an average income.⁷²

4.4 Aid access to Syria

Closure of UN border crossings and Russian veto, 2023

In 2014, the UN Security Council unanimously [adopted Resolution 2165](#) (2014), which established four crossing points into Syria (Bab al-Salam, Bab al-Hawa, Al Yarubiyah and Al-Ramtha) for UN agencies and other partners to deliver humanitarian aid.⁷³

However, Russia and China blocked the renewal of these crossings, and by 2020 only one remained open: Bab al-Hawa on the Turkey-Syrian border, near Idlib.⁷⁴

In July 2023, Russia vetoed the continuation of the final UN border crossing, arguing that the Syrian Government should be responsible for authorising and coordinating aid to the country.⁷⁵ The UK Government condemned Russia's act, arguing there was "no rational or moral argument" for it.⁷⁶

What border crossings are now in place?

When in power, the Assad government allowed a number of border crossings, including into opposition-controlled areas around Idlib. These included two border crossings (Bab al-Salam and al-Rae) with Turkey in north-western Syria. These were opened in response to the February 2023 earthquakes.⁷⁷

⁷¹ UNOCHA, [Syrian Arab Republic: 2024 humanitarian need overview](#), 3 March 2024, p7

⁷² As above, pp18, 33, 46. The standard food basket, used as a benchmark to monitor changes over time, provides 2,060 kcal/day for a family of five in Syria. It includes: 37 kg bread, 19 kg rice, 19 kg lentils, 5 kg sugar, and 7 litres of vegetable oil

⁷³ UN, [With millions of Syrians in need, Security Council adopts Resolution 2165 \(2014\)](#), 14 July 2014

⁷⁴ CSIS, [The implications of the UN cross-border vote in Syria](#), 4 June 2021 and Security Council Report (not affiliated with the UN), [The demise of the Syria cross-border aid mechanism](#), 31 July 2023

⁷⁵ UN, [In meeting following Russian Federation's veto \[...\]](#), 19 July 2023

⁷⁶ FCDO, [There is no rational or moral argument for Russia to veto the resolution \[...\]](#), 11 July 2023

⁷⁷ [First UN aid enters northwest Syria from newly-opened crossing](#), Reuters, 15 February 2023

Following the Russian veto in July 2023, the UN and Assad government reached an agreement to continue the two crossings from Turkey announced earlier in 2023 and at a third point, Bab al-Hawa.⁷⁸

The Assad government most recently extended its consent for aid via the Bab al-Hawa crossing in June 2024. This is due to expire on 13 January 2025. Around 90% of UN trucks carrying aid into Syria use the crossing.⁷⁹

Many analysts viewed the Russian veto and Assad-UN agreement as a victory for his government, arguing it strengthens its image as a provider of humanitarian aid and undermines the role of the UN.⁸⁰

4.5

Syria's deteriorating economy and revenues

Rising poverty

- In 2022 the Humanitarian Needs Assessment Program for Syria and World Bank estimated that the national poverty rate was around 70%, up from 10% in 2011, with 14.5 million people in poverty. Poverty was defined as those living on US\$3.65 per day.⁸¹
- Female-headed households and those displaced were mostly likely to live in poverty.
- In Aleppo, Hama, and Deir-ez-Zor provinces, more than 50% of the population lived in extreme poverty, defined as less than US\$2.15 per person per day.⁸²
- The conflict is estimated to also have had negative impacts on Syria's neighbours, pushing up poverty rates by 4 percentage points in Jordan, 6 points in Iraq and 7 points in Lebanon.⁸³

Collapse in GDP and Assad government revenues

- Syria's gross domestic product shrank 54% from 2010 to 2021.⁸⁴
- Assad government revenues have fallen 85% from 2010 to 2023. Subsidy programmes for food and gas, as well as social security, have been reduced as a result.⁸⁵
- Oil production has fallen substantially, from 383,000 barrels per day in 2010 to 90,000 in 2023. The Syrian Democratic Forces control most production sites.⁸⁶

⁷⁸ UN, [Deal reached with Syria to reopen main border crossing with Türkiye](#), 9 August 2023

⁷⁹ [Syria extends consent for UN to provide aid via Bab al-Hawa crossing](#), BBC Monitoring, 12 July 2024

⁸⁰ [Syria's Assad "wins big" in UN deal reviving aid to rebel-held northwest](#), Al-Monitor, 9 August 2023

⁸¹ World Bank, [Syria: economic monitor, Spring 2024](#), p32

⁸² As above, p32

⁸³ World Bank, [The regional consequences of the conflict in Syria](#), September 2020, pp17-18

⁸⁴ World Bank, [Syria: economic monitor, Spring 2024](#), May 2024, p7

⁸⁵ As above, pp19-20

⁸⁶ As above, p8

- The consumer price index has been persistently high. The Syrian pound has lost 90% of its value against the US dollar since 2020.⁸⁷

Damage to infrastructure

Syrian infrastructure has also been severely damaged by the conflict. In 2022, the World Bank surveyed damage across 14 cities and 11 sectors. These included Aleppo, Idlib, Homs and Hasakah (it did not include the capital Damascus). It estimated that:⁸⁸

- Total damage across these sites totalled US\$8.7 to US\$11.4 billion.
- The greatest value in damage to a single sector was agriculture and food chains (up to US\$3.4 billion) followed by housing (up to US\$2.8 billion).
- The greatest damage, by value, had occurred in Aleppo (up to US\$3.1 billion), followed by Idlib (up to US\$0.9 billion).
- An estimated 11% of the roads in these cities had been damaged, 60% of the electricity infrastructure in Idlib, and 20% of the capacity of the country's power plants destroyed.
- An estimated 28% of the health facilities in these 14 cities had been partially damaged and 8% destroyed.
- An estimated 13% of education facilities had been partially damaged in the 14 cities, and 5% destroyed.

In 2024 the World Bank estimated that the 2023 earthquakes caused total damage of US\$5.2 billion. It also downgraded growth estimates for the Syrian economy in 2023 from -3.2% to -5.5%. The World Bank also estimated that annual inflation would rise from around 44% to 60% due to supply chain disruption and higher transport costs, also curbing private consumption.⁸⁹

Trade in captagon drug

Captagon is a highly addictive amphetamine. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime 2024 report says the majority of captagon in the Middle East originates in Syria and, to a lesser extent, Lebanon.⁹⁰ Analysts estimate that 80% of the world's supply originates from Syria, with the Assad government the substantial beneficiary from the trade.⁹¹

The US and UK governments described the trade as a "lifeline" for the Assad government and applied sanctions against those involved in the trade.⁹² Jordan, as a neighbour of Syria, and the Arab Gulf States, where large

⁸⁷ World Bank, [Syria: economic monitor. Spring 2024](#), May 2024, pp17-18

⁸⁸ The below from World Bank, [Syria joint damage assessment 2022](#), May 2023, pp14-20

⁸⁹ World Bank, [The Syria earthquake 2023 rapid damage and needs assessment](#), May 2024, p8

⁹⁰ UN Office on Drugs and Crime, [World drug report 2024](#), p29

⁹¹ Royal United Services Institute, [Syria, Captagon and geopolitics](#), 14 June 2024; New Lines Institute, [The Captagon trade from 2015 to 2023](#), May 2024, pp19-21

⁹² FCDO, [Tackling the illicit drug fuelling Assad's war machine](#), 28 March 2023; US Treasury Department, [Sanctions targeting financial facilitators and illicit drug traffickers supporting the Syrian regime](#), 26 March 2024

amounts of captagon have been intercepted, had called on President Assad to contain the trade as part of their restoration of diplomatic relations in 2023. Jordan has reportedly conducted some military operations against cross-border captagon smuggling networks.⁹³

4.6 Islamic State/Daesh

Islamic State activity

Since 2019 Islamic State/Daesh no longer holds territory in Syria and Iraq, but in June 2024 US military said it considered the group is “attempting to reconstitute”.⁹⁴

US Central Command said that from January to June 2024 Islamic State claimed to have conducted 153 attacks in Syria and Iraq. This was around double the number of claimed attacks in 2023.

The US and the Global Coalition to Defeat Islamic State is continuing to target the estimated 2,500 fighters that remain in Iraq and Syria. Around 9,000 fighters remain in detention. The Syrian Democratic Forces also have around 44,000 people linked to Islamic State, mostly women and children, in Al Hol and Roj Camps. Their repatriation is being sought.

End to the coalition mission in Iraq in 2025

In September 2024 the United States and Iraq reached an agreement on plans to withdraw US-led “Global Coalition Against Daesh” forces from Iraq. Coalition forces are to leave the majority of Iraq by September 2025, and transition to a bilateral security partnership, which “supports Iraqi forces and maintain pressure” on Islamic State. A presence will continue in Iraq to support the US and coalition action in Syria until September 2026.⁹⁵

The UK Government supported the agreement and said it would advance a new bilateral relationship with Iraq.⁹⁶

In March 2024 US General Michael Kurilla had told the US Congress that there were risks to a “premature” departure from Syria and Iraq:

⁹³ Washington Institute, [A year of Arab engagement with Assad has failed](#), 15 May 2024; [Carnegie Endowment, How Syria uses captagon to gain leverage over Saudi Arabia](#), 9 July 2024

⁹⁴ This section from Centcom, [Defeat for ISIS mission in Iraq and Syria for January-June 2024](#), 16 July 2024

⁹⁵ US Department of State, [Joint statement announcing the timeline for the end of military mission](#), 27 September 2024

⁹⁶ Ministry of Defence, [UK response to the conclusion of the Global Coalition’s military mission in Iraq](#), 28 September 2024

We must also prevent a premature Coalition departure from Iraq and Syria. If Iran and Russia were to succeed in their goal of pushing us out before our partner forces can operate independently, it is my assessment that ISIS would reconstitute the ability to seize territory within two years. The Global Coalition's sustained presence not only helps our partners in their fight against ISIS, it also prevents the reemergence of territorial control and ensures the group does not have a safe haven in Iraq or Syria to plan global attacks. The eventual transition to a traditional security cooperation framework must be predicated on Partner Force Development and Security Sector Reform in Iraq, and continued repatriations, secure detention facilities, and a political pathway for the SDF in Syria.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Centcom, [Statement of General Michael Kurilla on the posture \[...\]](#), 7 March 2024

5

The UK and Syria: key statistics

5.1

UK aid

Total aid since 2011

The UK Government says its main objectives in Syria are to:

- Provide humanitarian support, including for those internally displaced.
- Support recovery work, such as education for girls.
- Protect UK national security in respect to terrorism, radicalisation, and contesting “malign” Russian influence in the country.⁹⁸

The UK has provided £4.3 billion in official development assistance (ODA) to Syria from 2011 to 2024.

Syria has been the fourth largest recipient of UK aid in the Asia region from 2011 to 2023, as shown in the table below. The highest amount of annual bilateral aid to Syria during this period was in 2016, at £352 million. It fell in later years as part of [reductions in UK aid spending](#), though rose in 2023.⁹⁹

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).

Top 6 recipients of UK bilateral ODA in Asia, 2011-2023														
£ millions, not adjusted for inflation														
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
Pakistan	207	189	338	266	374	463	402	331	305	200	128	58	69	3,330
Afghanistan	264	274	212	198	300	235	227	249	290	226	187	352	115	3,128
Bangladesh	230	196	272	208	164	149	176	190	256	203	87	55	58	2,244
Syria	1	40	139	130	258	352	200	231	223	181	91	63	109	2,018
India	283	292	268	279	186	93	90	95	108	95	91	46	26	1,949
Yemen	39	40	95	82	82	127	205	166	260	221	114	77	101	1,610

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

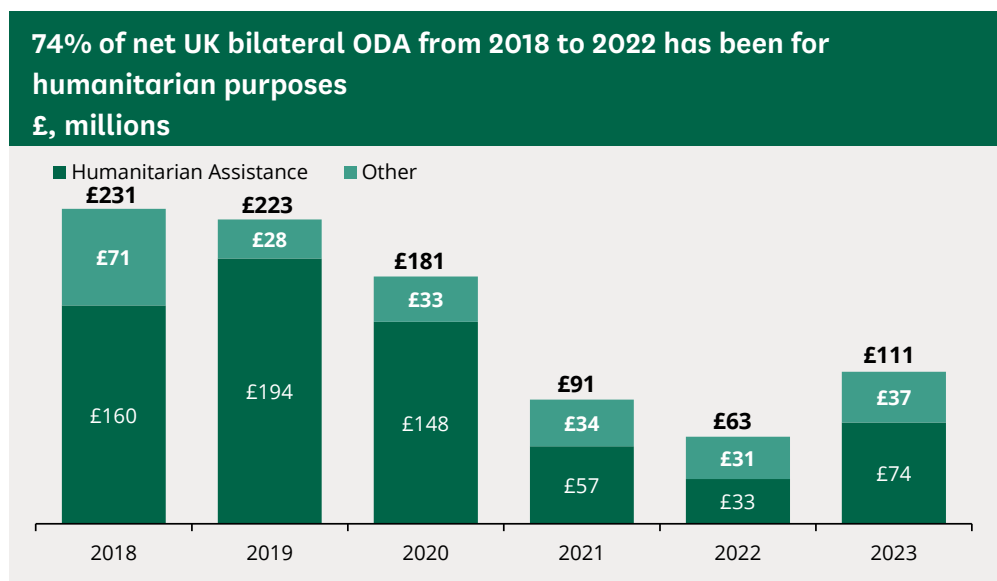
Source: FCDO, [Additional tables on international development spending, Table 4AB, Total bilateral ODA by country-Asia](#), September 2024

UK aid has primarily been humanitarian in nature in recent years (2018 to 2023), peaking at £194 million of humanitarian aid in 2019. Humanitarian aid stood at £33 million in 2022 and £74 million in 2023. Aid classed as humanitarian assistance involves the provision of material aid (such as shelter and food) to save lives, alleviate suffering, and maintain human

⁹⁸ FCDO, [UK-Syria development partnership summary](#), 17 July 2023

⁹⁹ HC Deb, [2 December 2024](#), c62; FCDO, [UK announces £50m new support](#), 15 December 2024

dignity following crises and disasters.¹⁰⁰ The chart below shows the proportion of UK ODA classed as humanitarian since 2018.



Source: FCDO, [Data underlying the SIDS](#), September 2024 and earlier editions

Reductions in aid spending from 2019 to 2022

Reflecting the reduction in UK aid spending from 0.7% of gross national income (GNI) to 0.5%, bilateral UK aid to Syria fell in every year from 2019 to 2022: from £223 million to £63 million.

The National Audit Office provides analysis of the reduction in UK aid to Syria from 2020/21 to 2021/22 in its 2022 report on [Managing reductions in UK aid spending](#), on pages 70 to 74.

UK aid spending in 2023 and 2024

Under plans announced under the Conservative government in July 2024, bilateral aid to Syria from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) was expected to almost double from £49 million in 2021/22 to £97 million in 2024/25. The figures do not take account of spending by other government departments or UK contributions to multilateral organisations (such as the World Bank) that may also spend aid.¹⁰¹

In October 2024 the Labour government said budgeted spend for Syria in 2024/25 was £97 million, as announced in July 2023. It said £3 million would

¹⁰⁰ FCDO, [Statistics on international development: Annex 1](#), September 2021, p6

¹⁰¹ [FCDO annual report and accounts 2021 to 2022](#), July 2022, pp251-2; [FCDO annual report and account 2022 to 2023](#), July 2023, pp267-8

be targeted at refugees from Lebanon displaced to Syria because of the 2023/24 Israel-Hezbollah conflict.¹⁰²

In December 2024, the government made three announcements:

- 6 December: £2.3 million to the Syrian white helmets (officially the Syrian Civil Defence). This is a volunteer civil society organisation that has primarily worked in opposition-controlled areas.¹⁰³
- 9 December: £11 million in humanitarian aid for vulnerable Syrians, including those displaced by recent conflict.¹⁰⁴
- 15 December: £50 million in new humanitarian aid. Of this, £30 million will support the immediate needs of 1 million Syrians. £10 million will be for the World Food Programme (WFP) in Lebanon and £10 million for the WFP and UN Refugee Agency in Jordan, to support Syrian refugees.¹⁰⁵

Aid will be delivered through UN agencies and non-governmental groups.

In response to the 2023 earthquakes in Syria and Turkey, the UK Government committed up to £28 million to support the response in Syria and committed up to £150 million in June 2023 for Syria.¹⁰⁶

5.2

UK foreign fighters in Syria

Foreigner fighters have fought for several forces in the Syrian conflict, joining, for example, Kurdish forces, mercenary groups, and Islamic State. [UN Resolution 2178 \(2014\)](#) requires states to take steps to prevent and suppress the recruitment and financing of foreign fighters in Syria.¹⁰⁷

How many foreign fighters joined Islamic State in Syria?

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 Islamic State](#) in Iraq and Syria, and that 5,600 from 33 countries had returned home.¹⁰⁸ Many remain in Syria, either in custody or at large.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰² FCDO, [UK commits an additional £3 million to bolster aid to Syria](#), 22 October 2024

¹⁰³ FCDO, [New funding for white helmets](#), 6 December 2024

¹⁰⁴ Prime Minister's Office, [Stability in the Middle East vital to delivery at home](#), 9 December 2024

¹⁰⁵ FCDO, [UK announces £50 million new support \[...\]](#), 15 December 2024

¹⁰⁶ PQ 14854 [[Syria: earthquakes](#)], 20 February 2024

¹⁰⁷ UN Security Council, [S/RES/2178 \(2014\)](#), September 2014

¹⁰⁸ UN, [Greater cooperation needed to tackle danger \[...\]](#), 28 November 2017

¹⁰⁹ [How many IS foreign fighters are left in Iraq and Syria?](#), BBC News; 20 February 2019

The number of UK citizens who have fought with Islamic State in Iraq and Syria is uncertain – in 2019, the government estimated they numbered 900.¹¹⁰

UK policy and response

In 2018, the government said that of the estimated 900 UK citizens in Syria who fought with Islamic State:

- 40 had been prosecuted because of their actions in Syria (4%)
- 180 had been killed (20%)
- 540 had returned to the UK (60%). In 2019, the Home Office reported around 400 had returned (44%)
- This implies around 180 to 320 remained in Syria (20% to 36%).¹¹¹

From 2010 to 2019, around 150 people were deprived of their British citizenship for links to terrorism and serious crime.¹¹² This includes those involved in action beyond Islamic State and Syria/Iraq.

The Commons 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, subject to national security concerns.¹¹³

It hopes that those who have supported Islamic State will be prosecuted in the region.¹¹⁴

5.3

UK military activity

Since August 2014, the UK armed forces have conducted airstrikes in Iraq and Syria against the Islamic State, under Operation Shader, and provided military support to the US-led coalition. Operations in Syria began in 2015.¹¹⁵

As of September 2024, the RAF have flown 10,000 sorties striking more than 1,400 targets and have also conducted surveillance and reconnaissance operations. The UK has provided training to 111,000 members of the Iraqi

¹¹⁰ HC Deb, [UK nationals returning from Syria, 18 February 2019](#), c1193. This remained their estimate in 2021: PQ HL 4668 [[Islamic State: British nationals abroad](#)], 16 December 2021

¹¹¹ [Shamima Begun, How do countries deal with people returning from IS?](#), BBC News, 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

¹¹² HC Deb, [Deprivation of citizenship status](#), 20 February 2019, c1486

¹¹³ PQ HL9985 [[Syria: Migrant camps](#)], 16 November 2020

¹¹⁴ HC Deb, [4 March 2021](#), c411

¹¹⁵ Ministry of Defence (MOD), [Update: air strikes against Daesh](#), last updated 16 September 2024

security forces, including 21,000 members of the Kurdish Peshmerga (internal security forces).¹¹⁶

In previous years, the Ministry of Defence has provided updates on the number of personnel deployed on Operation Shader in its [Annual report and accounts](#). According to the 2020–21 annual report, around 1,100 personnel were involved in Operation Shader at the end of the reporting period.¹¹⁷ No figure was provided in the 2021–22 annual report.¹¹⁸

Casualties and fatalities

As of 30 September 2024, one member of the UK armed forces has been killed in action during Operation Shader and three have suffered battle injuries. A further six military personnel died on operation, but not in hostile action.¹¹⁹

All three battle injuries occurred between 1 January and 31 March 2020 and they account for 1% of the 411 non-fatal casualties recorded on Operation Shader from August 2014 to September 2024. All other casualties were either non-battle injuries, such as road traffic or sporting accidents, or occurred due to natural causes.¹²⁰

The UK has accepted responsibility for one civilian fatality that occurred during an airstrike in eastern Syria on 26 March 2018.¹²¹ 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.¹²²

Cost of Operation Shader

The most recent figures to 2023/24 show that the total cost of Operation Shader since 2014 has amounted to £3.0 billion in real terms (at 2023/24 prices). As shown on the chart below, the cost of operations peaked in 2017/18 and has since fallen by around 84%.

¹¹⁶ MOD, [UK response to the conclusion of the Global Coalition's military mission](#), 28 September 2024

¹¹⁷ MOD, [Annual report and accounts 2020 to 2021](#), 20 January 2022, p41

¹¹⁸ MOD, [Annual report and accounts 2021 to 2022](#), 14 July 2022

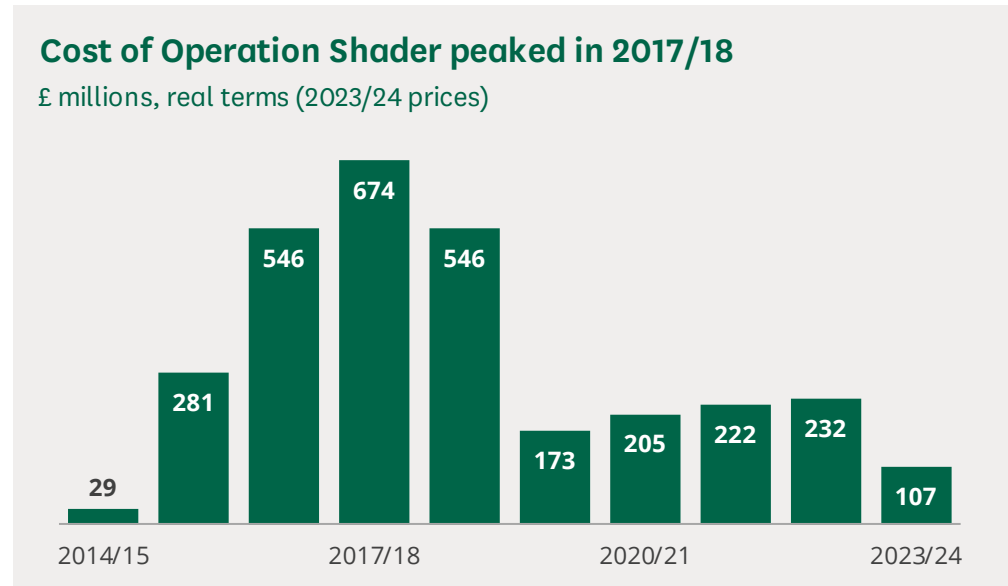
¹¹⁹ MOD, [Biannual UK armed forces and UK entitled civilians operational casualty and fatality statistics: 1 January 2006 to 30 September 2024](#), 14 November 2024. Fatalities recorded as 'died on operation' include accidental deaths, assaults, suicides and deaths as a result of natural causes. Full definitions of terms used to record casualties and fatalities are listed in the 'glossary and definitions' sections of the publication report.

¹²⁰ Figures presented are based on casualties that meet the reporting criteria for this Official Statistic, which includes casualties resulting in an initial notification of casualty (the formalised system of reporting casualties within the UK armed forces) being raised, admission to a UK led field hospital (where data are available) or an aeromedical evacuation.

¹²¹ HCWS 665 [[Counter-Daesh operations](#)], 2 May 2018

¹²² PQ 171461 [[Iraq and Syria: military intervention](#)], 27 March 2023

Between 2015/16 and 2021/22, counter Daesh operations, under Operation Shader, were the largest contribution to Ministry of Defence operations expenditure. Since 2022/23, this has been overtaken by expenditure on military support to Ukraine.¹²³



Note: GDP deflator growth for 2020/21 and 2021/22 has been averaged across the two years to smooth distortions caused by pandemic-related factors.

Source: Ministry of Defence, [Defence Departmental Resources: 2024](#), 28 November 2024, Table 7; HM Treasury, [GDP deflators at market prices](#), October 2024 (Autumn Budget)

¹²³ MOD, [Defence departmental resources: 2024](#), 28 November 2024

6

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 Association, [Timeline of Syrian chemical weapons activity, 2012-2022](#)

Regularly updated resources

General

- Council on Foreign Relations, [Syria](#)
- Council on Foreign Relations, [Conflict in Syria](#)
- International Crisis Group, [Crisis Watch: Syria](#)
- Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), [Syria](#)
- ACAPS, [Syria](#)

Humanitarian/Human rights (including UK aid)

- UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, [Syrian Arab Republic](#)
- UN Refugee Agency, [Syrian Arab Republic](#).
- UN Human Rights Council, [Independent International Commission for the Syrian Arab Republic](#)
- Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), [Development tracker: Syria](#). List of current UK aid projects in Syria
- FCDO, [UK humanitarian aid and spend in Syria factsheet](#), 22 October 2024
- FCDO, [UK-Syria development partnership summary page](#), July 2023. Sets out key UK objectives and programmes in Syria.

Military activity by UK and United States

- 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 Islamic State/Daesh]. Issues quarterly reports.

Reports and reviews on Syria

UN and World Bank Reports

- World Bank, [The welfare of Syrian households after a decade of conflict](#), May 2024
- World Bank, [Syria: economic monitor, Spring 2024](#), May 2024
- 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
- World Bank, [The toll of war: the economic and social consequences of the conflict on Syria](#), 2017

UK Parliament reports on UK Syria policy

Defence committee

- [UK military operations in Mosul and Raqqa inquiry](#), 2018
- [UK policy on Syria inquiry](#), 2017
- [UK military operations in Syria](#), 2016
- [The situation in Iraq and Syria](#), 2015

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- [The UK's engagement with the Middle East and North Africa enquiry](#), 2024 (no report published)
- [Kurdish aspirations and the interests of the UK inquiry](#), 2018

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- Lords International Relations and Defence Committee, [Transformation of power in the Middle East and implications for UK policy inquiry](#), May 2017
- Commons/Lords Joint Committee on Human Rights, [Government's policy on use of drones for targeted killing](#), 2015
- House of Lords Constitution Committee, [Constitutional arrangements for the use of armed force](#), 2013

Reports on Syrian refugees and UK aid

Commons International Development Committee

- [UK aid for refugee host countries](#), May 2023
- [Humanitarian situation in Syria inquiry](#), 2019
- [Follow-up on Yemen, Syria, Israel and Occupied Territories inquiry](#), 2019
- [Syrian refugee crisis: Follow-up](#), 2017
- [Syrian refugee crisis](#), 2016
- [The crisis in Syria](#), 2013

Other reports

- National Audit Office, [Managing reductions in ODA spending](#), 2022
- Independent Commission for Aid Impact, [Report: the UK's humanitarian support to Syria](#), 2018
- Independent Commission for Aid Impact, [The UK's aid response to irregular migration in the central Mediterranean](#), 2017

Parliamentary proceedings since 2020

- HL Deb, [Syria](#), 12 December 2024, cc1966-76
- HC Deb, [Syria](#), 9 December 2024, cc692-714
- HL Deb, [North-west Syria](#), 3 December 2024, cc1105-1112
- HC Deb, [North-west Syria](#), 2 December 2024, c61-70
- HL Deb, [Syria \(sanctions\) \(EU exit\) \(amendment\) \(No. 2\) Regulations 2024](#), 15 October 2024

- HC Deb, [Sanctions: Syria](#), 9 September 2024, cc624-32
- HC Deb, [North and east Syria: autonomous administration](#), 2 February 2023, cc989-998
- HL Deb, [Turkey and Syria earthquakes](#), 6 March 2023, cc640-7
- HC Deb, [Turkey and Syria earthquakes](#), 1 March 2023, cc803-13
- HL Deb, [Turkey: earthquake relief](#), 6 February 2023, cc966-69
- HC Deb, [Government policy on Syria](#), 15 June 2022, cc403-8
- HC Deb, [Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon](#), 22 June 2021, cc312-18WH
- HC Deb, [Syria: humanitarian situation](#), 3 November 2020, cc100-116WH
- HL Deb, [Syria](#), 24 February 2020, cc76-9
- HC Deb, [Syria: Security situation](#), 24 February 2020, cc23-35

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