

A photograph of a woman and a young child in a refugee camp. The woman, wearing a patterned headscarf and a long grey dress, is sitting on the ground, looking down. The child, wearing a striped sweater, is sitting on the ground, looking up. A small fire is burning in a metal stove, with a large pot on top. The background shows other people and tents in a dusty, open area.

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DIGGING DEEPER

The Syrian Civil War



Photo: Helen Manson

Introducing the Syrian Civil War

In 1960, Syria had a population of just over 4 million. By 2011 (the year war began) its population had reached almost 22 million. That large population increase in just 50 years enabled the nation to flourish but it also put pressure on natural resources to maintain its agricultural sector.¹

The period from 2006-2011, was difficult for those who lived in rural Syria, and various factors (climate change leading to shifts in rainfall, mismanagement of natural resources, demographic tensions) led to crop failures, creating food insecurity for millions. This resulted in rapid and significant urbanisation and widespread dissatisfaction with the response from the government. In March 2011, popular protests began, expressing discontent towards the government of Bashar al-Assad. The government responded with force and tensions quickly escalated to armed conflict between the government and various opposition groups.

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Because of the demographics and politics of the Middle East, the conflict took on a sectarian nature, with Sunni and Shia Islamic groups entering into conflict with each other. This reflects the power struggle in the Middle East that exists between Saudi Arabia (Sunni) and Iran (Shia), though the complexity of the war cannot be reduced to a simplistic Sunni vs Shia narrative.

1. <https://countrymeters.info/en/Syria>

2. climateandsecurity.org/2012/02/29/syria

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran, along with their allies, have involved themselves in the Syrian civil war to varying degrees to sway the outcome in their favour. On the side of Bashar al-Assad, Iran has given support as have Russia and Hezbollah, a militant group based in neighbouring Lebanon. Saudi Arabia, other Gulf states, Turkey and several Western nations (including the US, UK France and Australia) have supported many of the groups opposing Assad.

Early in the development of the Syrian civil war, it became clear that extremist opposition groups were operating inside the country. All nations involved from all sides have condemned these groups. ISIS emerged among those groups and grew its powerbase to cover large parts of Syria and Iraq. ISIS grew out of what was al-Qaeda in Iraq, which was formed by Sunni militants after the US-led invasion in 2003 and became a major force in the country's sectarian insurgency. All sides are in opposition to ISIS (though behind the scenes some bought oil from ISIS), so the war played out on several fronts.

When ISIS changed its name to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and expanded into Syria in April 2014, it claimed nine Syrian provinces, covering most of the country³. It is estimated that 98 per cent of the territories once held by the group in Syria and Iraq, have now been taken back⁴.

To add more complexity to the war, the Kurdish people (who reside across the north-eastern part of Syria, the south-western part of Turkey, and the northern part of Iraq but have no state to call their own) have been fighting the extremist groups and forming an autonomous region of their own in the north-eastern part of Syria.

The US backed the Kurds as they were one of the early opposition groups to fight ISIS. Turkey, while being allied to the US, is opposed

to the Kurds as it fears their impact within their borders should their strength grow. While having been an ally of the US, more recently, Turkey has turned towards Russia in connection with the ongoing Syrian war, agreeing in 2017 to cooperate to end it⁵. The US pulled back from the conflict in October 2019⁶ and now only has a small contingent in Syria to protect oil fields and the Jordan and Israeli borders. This happened as Turkey made incursions into Syria to control the Kurds.

The Humanitarian Crisis

Due to the conflict, around 6.6 million people have fled the country since 2011 and more than 6 million remain trapped within Syria⁷.

The humanitarian fallout of the Syrian civil war has been one of the most disastrous in modern times. Neighbouring nations like Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt have taken most of those Syrian refugees. Turkey hosts 3.5 million (the largest concentration of Syrian refugees) and Lebanon where Tearfund's partner is working, hosts about 1.5 million (some of this number includes unregistered refugees)⁸.

Among the Syrian refugees, minority groups find it particularly difficult, with many people from such groups failing to officially register in the UN refugee programme due to fears for their safety. Such groups include minority religions (such as Christians). Syrian refugees that do not register because of fear, do not get access to the basic needs supplied by the UN.

The longer the war continues and the Syrian refugees are not settled, the deeper a lack of a stable home and income bites. Refugee camps are meant to be temporary measures. They come with safety risks and disease outbreaks. Within Syria, whole towns and cities are cut off from basic supplies and face issues such as food insecurity and lack of access to medical help and they live in fear of being killed by troops. With no end to the Syrian civil war in sight, the crisis continues to grow. Year upon year, more Syrians flee and become refugees.

3. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ISIL_territorial_claims#:~:text=When%20the%20group%20changed%20its,Governorate\)%2C%20Raqq%2C%20Homs%2C](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ISIL_territorial_claims#:~:text=When%20the%20group%20changed%20its,Governorate)%2C%20Raqq%2C%20Homs%2C)

4. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034>

5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russia%E2%80%93Turkey_relations

6. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-50134430>

7. <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Syria%20Operational%20Update%20June%202020.pdf>

8. <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/>

A Biblical Perspective

A lot of modern discussion around biblical approaches to war is influenced by the 'just war' theory that largely originated with Augustine in the 5th century and was later built upon by Thomas Aquinas. The argument offers criteria by which war could be tested to determine whether it was justified or not.

Much of the modern Christian discussion of war, influenced by this, focuses on whether or not particular wars and actions within war are justifiable. We contend that this misses a deeper and more challenging call to Christians that transcends whether war is justifiable or not.

'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.' (Matt 5:9) This is the call of Jesus. The Greek word in the New Testament for 'peace' corresponds to the Jewish word, 'Shalom'. Both reference wholeness, completeness, restoration, life as it is intended to be. It means calling people to and upholding the "Imago Dei" or image of God of all humanity. (Gen 1:26 -27)

The challenge in Jesus' call to be peacemakers calls us to something much deeper than simply working out whether or not a war is justified. It drives us to actively work for healing, redemption, and wholeness where violent conflict has wrought destruction.

We are to magnify the voices of peacemakers and heal those who fall victim to the tragedy of violent conflict.



Photo: Helen Manson