

ORION FORUM

Women and War in Syria: Gendering of the Syrian Civil War

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A comprehensive overview of the Syrian Civil War extends from its origins during the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011 through to the fall of the Assad regime in 2024 and continues into the country's ongoing transitional period. It examines the rise of extremist groups and assesses the role of foreign interventions (e.g. those of the US, Russia, and Turkey) in shaping the conflict's trajectory. The war's devastating humanitarian toll is detailed, with a focus on the mass displacement of civilians, widespread destruction of infrastructure, and extensive human rights abuses, particularly through the use of chemical weapons, mass executions, and the targeting of schools and hospitals.

Central to this study is an in-depth analysis of how the conflict has uniquely impacted Syrian women. It highlights the gendered dimensions of war, including increased sexual violence, forced marriage, economic disempowerment, and lack of access to healthcare and education. Despite these challenges, Syrian women have emerged as vital actors in the humanitarian response, peacebuilding, and civil society leadership. Women-led initiatives have displayed resilience in providing essential services and advocating for inclusive peace, even as women remain underrepresented in formal negotiations and decision-making structures.

As Syria transitions into a new political era under the leadership of Ahmed al-Sharaa, the present study argues that the future stability of the country will hinge on the meaningful inclusion of women in its recovery and governance processes. Nevertheless, while the newly enacted constitutional declaration promises protections for women's rights, structural barriers remain. Without targeted investment in women's health, livelihoods, safety, and leadership, the vision of a peaceful and equitable Syria will remain out of reach.

In writing this article, the authors have interviewed and occasionally quoted six Syrian women to learn more about the realities on the ground. All interviews were conducted using the [Chatham House Rules](#) of anonymity to ensure the safety and protection of interviewees.

Backdrop of the Civil War

When the Arab Spring uprising began in December 2010 in Tunisia, it echoed across the repressed region, including Syria. The seeds of a devastating civil war were sown in the city of Daraa in March 2011 when some 15-year-old boys [spray-painted](#) on a school wall, “The people want the fall of the regime.” The culprits were arrested and [tortured](#), which sparked further demonstrations and protests demanding democratic reforms and the release of political prisoners. As the protests intensified across Syria, the regime responded with military force by bringing in tanks to Daraa and other cities. Consequently, the civilian death toll rose as inhabitants endured days without food, water, medicine, communication, or electricity, conditions that led some regime opponents to take up arms.

The Arab Spring uprisings thus led to the Syrian civil war, spurred by an unchecked flow of weapons, money, equipment, and foreign fighters from various global regions. Eventually, conflict culminated in the rise of three main Islamist groups: Al Qaeda (AQ), Al Qaeda’s ally Jabhat Al-Nusra Front, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). This development had lethal effects, causing massive destruction in the ongoing civil war; millions became refugees or internally displaced persons or suffered massive casualties and a death toll that numbered in the hundreds of thousands.

Foreign Intervention

The US presence in Syria has had three primary objectives: counterterrorism, long-term strategic stability, and countering the regional influence of adversarial states. The US counterterrorism mission has remained broadly consistent throughout the conflict, with a sustained [focus](#) on degrading ISIS and preventing its territorial or operational resurgence. Despite shifting political leadership, combating ISIS expansion continues to be a central pillar of US strategy in Syria. For example, in December 2024, ISIS leader [Mahmud](#), also known as Abu Yusif, was killed in Syria’s Dayr az-Zawr Province. Around the same time, coalition forces [captured another](#) cell leader in the area. These recent developments are part of an enduring

campaign to eliminate terrorist networks operating in the region.

Russia formally intervened in the Syrian conflict in [September 2015](#), presenting its involvement as a counterterrorism mission aimed at combating ISIS and other extremist groups. In practice, however, Russian military operations primarily targeted opposition-held areas, including those controlled by US-backed rebels, and effectively bolstered the Assad regime under the guise of counterterrorism efforts.

As the civil war became a proxy war, the foreign rivalries intensified even more, including Turkey's involvement. Early in the conflict, the 600-mile Syrian-Turkish border became a hotspot for military clashes between the Turkish Army and various warring factions to the south. However, Turkey did not engage in its first large-scale military incursion in Syria until August 24, 2016, when the Turkish military [intervened](#) with Operation Euphrates Shield. Turkey conducted two further significant military operations in Syria in 2020 and 2022 as part of its broader strategy to counter Kurdish forces and protect its interests in northern Syria. Subsequently, Turkey [continued](#) drone strikes in 2023 and 2024 but did not escalate to a full-scale ground offensive.

The Collapse of the Assad Regime

Meanwhile, the opposition forces in Syria were preparing for a major [offensive](#) led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in November 2024 in the cities of Aleppo, Idlib, Homs, and Hama. The government continued to receive support from its Russian and Iranian allies who, however, were also engaged in conflicts in Ukraine and Lebanon. As Syrian cities fell to the opposition forces' control one by one, the rebels [announced](#) on December 7 that they had started surrounding Damascus after capturing nearby towns. The swift breakdown of government defenses led to the rapid retreat of security forces. [Reports](#) surfaced that Bashar al-Assad had fled the capital on a plane to Russia, where he reunited with his family, already in exile, and was granted asylum. Following Assad's departure, opposition forces declared victory on the state television.

Humanitarian Situation

The country's prolonged civil war resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Syrians and the displacement of nearly fourteen million [people](#)—more than half of the pre-war population. Today, Syria remains a deeply impoverished nation. Families face immense hardships, struggling to meet their basic needs, with 13.4 million people [requiring](#) humanitarian aid, including 6.7 million who are internally displaced. As of April 2024, [approximately](#) 7.5 million children needed humanitarian assistance. Each day, food and water shortages and limited access to healthcare endanger millions of lives.

[Eight in ten people](#) live below the poverty line, facing restricted access to education and employment. Simultaneously, a record 12.4 million—nearly 60 percent of the population—go to bed hungry every night. Moreover, the United Nations and human rights organizations have [reported](#) human rights violations by both government and rebel forces, with the Syrian government responsible for the vast majority. Throughout the conflict, particularly in the northwest, Syrian and Russian forces have [deployed](#) internationally banned cluster munitions, incendiary weapons, and wide-area explosive devices, including improvised “barrel bombs,” targeting schools, houses, and hospitals. These attacks have devastated key towns, specifically health facilities, and claimed the lives of thousands of civilians, including children.

Moreover, the Assad regime has been accused of using chemical weapons - including sarin nerve gas, chlorine, and sulfur mustard gas - multiple times, up to [17 instances](#) during the war, primarily targeting opposition-held areas in Ghouta, Douma, Ltamenah, and other centers. The deaths of [approximately](#) 1,400 civilians from chemical weapons used by the Assad regime in the summer of 2013 prompted world powers to take action to dismantle this chemical arsenal. However, in the years that followed, the Syrian government continued to deploy devastating conventional weapons, resulting in widespread civilian casualties.

Another discovery that underscores the scale of human rights violations in Syria consists in mass grave sites which, [referred](#) to as a “system of state terror” by a former US war crimes ambassador at large, contain the remains of civilians and combatants, many of whom were victims of extrajudicial killings, torture, and mass executions. It is [estimated](#) that more than 100,000 people were tortured and murdered over the years since the civil war began.

Extremist groups, such as ISIS, exploited the war conditions and forced thousands, the majority of them women and children, to live in detention camps for their suspected members and relatives. Al-Hol and Roj camps in northeastern Syria are testimonies to this, where [roughly](#) 60,000 people live in horrific conditions. Of the children in the camps, [nearly](#) 80 percent are under 12, and 30 percent are age 5 or younger. Many of the repatriated children have faced severe hardship. Their parents' decision to join ISIS led them to be taken to or born in conflict zones, where they may have witnessed violence, sustained injuries, or endured trauma. Most of their fathers were either killed in battles to defeat ISIS in northeast Syria or remain imprisoned in the region. Some children have also lost their mothers or are separated from them. While many younger children are too young to recall life under ISIS, they have endured dire conditions in detention camps, often resulting in serious health consequences.

Impact on Women

The war in Syria has had devastating consequences for the entire population. Still, its impact on women and girls has been particularly severe, exacerbating pre-existing gender inequalities and exposing them to unique forms of violence, displacement, and economic hardship. Women have been disproportionately affected by the conflict, facing heightened risks of sexual violence, forced displacement, and the loss of social and financial stability. According to the [United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner](#), the war has not only intensified gender-based violence but also limited women's access to essential resources and services, further marginalizing them in both public and private spheres. These challenges underscore the necessity of examining the Syrian war through a gendered lens to fully grasp its consequences on women's lives.

One of the most pressing issues facing Syrian women and girls is the increase in gender-based violence, a defining characteristic of conflict. [Reports](#) indicate that sexual violence has been systematically used as a weapon of war, targeting women to spread fear and break communities. Additionally, many families struggling with [economic hardship and displacement](#) have resorted to child and forced marriages as a way to survive, exposing young girls to vulnerability and limited autonomy. These forms of violence have long-lasting psychological and social consequences, making it increasingly difficult for women to regain their agency and

rebuild their lives in the aftermath of war.

Beyond violence, Syrian women have faced significant barriers to accessing humanitarian aid, healthcare, and economic opportunities. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) [reported](#) in 2024 that after 13 years of conflict, Syrian women and girls continue to struggle with inadequate access to maternal healthcare, reproductive services, and mental health support, particularly in displacement settings. The destruction of hospitals, medical shortages, and societal restrictions have further compounded these challenges, making it difficult for women to receive even basic medical care. The war has led to a demographic shift, with many men absent due to conscription, displacement, or death. Consequently, women have increasingly become primary [income](#) earners, taking on roles traditionally held by men. This shift has given women greater autonomy and decision-making power within their households. While the conflict has compelled Syrian women to assume greater economic roles, they continue to face significant challenges in securing safe, stable, and fairly compensated employment.

Despite these immense challenges, Syrian women have displayed remarkable resilience and strength in the face of adversity. Many have taken on new roles as heads of households, community leaders, and humanitarian workers, actively contributing to [their families' and communities' survival and recovery](#). However, systemic barriers such as economic, political, and legal ones hinder their participation in post-war reconstruction and decision-making processes. Addressing these challenges requires a gender-sensitive approach that prioritizes women's protection, ensures access to education and healthcare, and promotes their leadership in rebuilding Syria. Without such measures, women will remain among the most vulnerable groups affected by the war, perpetuating cycles of inequality and marginalization in the country's future.

The Health Situation of Women

The ongoing conflict in Syria has severely impacted women's health, particularly general and reproductive healthcare. [This long-lasting war](#) has led to the destruction of hospitals and clinics, with more than one in three health centers unable to operate at full capacity. The healthcare system is further strained by a [shortage](#) of medical professionals and essential supplies, making it difficult to provide adequate care. Additionally, attacks have directly

targeted healthcare facilities, diminishing access to critical services. Reports from [Doctors Without Borders](#) highlight that hospitals in northwest Syria continue to face bombings and funding shortages, putting the lives of women and newborns at risk. In the words of some interviewees, **“Women in camps suffered from a lack of privacy and healthcare services;”** they further stated that **“we established a women’s support center during the war. We faced challenges related to funding and societal acceptance of our initiatives (due to local customs and traditions related to women working and a lack of community support or funding grants).”**

Access to basic healthcare has been significantly compromised, particularly for displaced women. Over [6.3 million Syrian refugees](#) reside in neighboring countries, where healthcare services in refugee camps and informal settlements are often inadequate. Within Syria, internally displaced women face [additional challenges](#) in accessing medical care, particularly for chronic conditions such as diabetes and hypertension, due to the collapse of the healthcare system. Mental health has also emerged as a significant concern among women, as [years of conflict](#) and displacement have led to widespread [psychological distress](#), such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, manifesting in symptoms of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, yet mental health services remain severely limited. Many women who are suffering from trauma-related conditions are unable to receive treatment due to underfunded healthcare centers and the lack of trained professionals.

The crisis has also exacerbated gender-based violence, leading to severe health consequences for women. [Reports](#) indicate that conflict-related sexual violence has increased, particularly in displacement camps, where overcrowding and [lack of security](#) place women at heightened risk. Survivors of gender-based violence face significant barriers in [accessing medical and psychological support](#) due to stigma, fear, and the lack of available services. In many cases, humanitarian organizations have been unable to meet the growing demand for specialized care for survivors due to [funding shortages](#).

Reproductive health has been particularly affected by the war. Maternal and child healthcare services have collapsed in many areas, leading to an increase in maternal mortality. As of September 2024, half of the maternity hospitals in northwest Syria had suspended operations,

leaving approximately 1.3 million women of reproductive age without [access to essential maternal healthcare](#). The conflict has also led to [malnutrition among pregnant and lactating women](#) as food insecurity continues to rise, affecting both maternal and infant health. The shortage of essential maternal healthcare services has resulted in increased complications during pregnancy and childbirth, with many women unable to access emergency obstetric care.

Women in Syria also face significant challenges in accessing reproductive healthcare services. The conflict has disrupted supply chains, resulting in a shortage of contraceptives and family planning resources, which limits [reproductive choices](#) and increases the risk of unintended pregnancies. Additionally, many women are forced to give birth in [unsafe conditions](#) due to the destruction of healthcare facilities and the shortage of trained midwives. Adolescent girls are particularly at heightened risk, as early and forced marriages have increased as a coping mechanism for economic hardship, exposing them to significant health risks, including pregnancy complications and [limited access to education](#).

[Sexual and reproductive](#) rights have also been heavily restricted under conflict conditions. Many displaced women [lack access to menstrual health products](#) due to economic hardship and displacement, a shortage that affects their hygiene and dignity. Moreover, existing social and legal constraints further limit women's [reproductive autonomy](#), making it difficult for them to make informed healthcare decisions. These factors underscore the need for urgent humanitarian intervention to ensure that Syrian women receive adequate healthcare, including maternal and reproductive health services.

The Impact of Extremist Groups on Women

Although women were not often part of the fighting, they have been targeted by non-state actors through sexual assault and violence, which also affects prepubescent girls. There is no official estimate of how many Syrian women were forced into sex slavery, but the estimates for Yazidi women include a total of roughly [6,000](#) between Iraq and Syria. Based on the aforementioned estimates that comprise solely Yazidis, it can be confidently estimated that more than 15,000 women have become [sex slaves](#), sold for money or to AQ/ISIS fighters. Many have been forced into marriages with their buyers or captors and forced to have children.

Due to the traumatic events endured by women, many were left with severe mental illnesses and often lacked the necessary job skills needed to generate income once displaced. One Syrian woman stated in an interview, **“We lost our sense of security. We can no longer secure our livelihoods or provide proper growth for our children. We, as women, have had to take on everything—work and raising children.”**

Most of our interviews with Syrian women indicated that they did not have the skills or opportunities for work or the resources to begin agricultural projects needed for survival. According to societal standards, women were generally caretakers of the homes while men provided food and income for the family. The lack of job opportunities for women have exacerbated women’s abilities to provide for their families, leaving them more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse. A Syrian woman told us that the issues of **“gender inequality, lack of recognition for women’s roles, and no financial or moral support for women”** left them vulnerable to exploitation as they sought any means of survival. **“There was no support during the conflict.”** This left many coping with mental illnesses due to the trauma of losing their husbands and family members, oppression from the Assad regime, torment from terror groups like ISIS, Al Qaeda, and HTS, and the ongoing civil war.

Women’s Movements and Initiatives in Peace Processes

Syrian women have been instrumental in humanitarian efforts, peacebuilding initiatives, and political advocacy despite the ongoing conflict. Various organizations and grassroots movements have emerged to challenge violence, provide essential aid, and demand meaningful participation in peace negotiations. However, systemic barriers, including patriarchal structures, security threats, and lack of access to decision-making platforms continue to limit their influence in formal processes. Nevertheless, Syrian women have demonstrated resilience through leadership and perseverance in shaping their communities and advocating for sustainable peace despite these challenges.

Syrian women have played an active role in peace initiatives through grassroots activism, civil society engagement, and advocacy efforts. Many women-led organizations have worked to foster local reconciliation and support humanitarian efforts despite systemic barriers to their participation in formal negotiations. For instance, the *Syrian Women Making Peace Forum* has

created a [platform](#) for female leaders to engage with policymakers and advocate for inclusive peacebuilding strategies. This forum has brought together local and international organizations, emphasizing the urgent need for gender-inclusive policymaking.

Women have also been instrumental in transitional justice efforts, documenting [human rights violations](#) and pushing for accountability in post-conflict governance, even though Syrian women's participation in peace processes has remained minimal, with only 15% of female negotiators in the December 2017 UN-led Syrian peace talks in [Geneva](#). Despite evidence that agreements with women's involvement are 35% more likely to last over 15 years, women continue to face significant barriers to inclusion in formal negotiations. Consequently, Syrian activists have called for stronger mechanisms to ensure women's full participation in all stages of peacebuilding. For instance, Syria's women's movement, which emerged forcefully after the 2011 revolution, has persisted despite conflict and political repression. Even though women have formed grassroots initiatives, engaged in local governance, and provided crucial humanitarian aid, they remain largely excluded from formal political structures and peace talks. As highlighted in a recent [statement](#) by the Women's Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL), winning the peace in Syria requires a commitment to inclusivity, justice, and the active participation of women in all stages of the peace process. The statement emphasizes the need for long-term strategies prioritizing local leadership, gender-sensitive policies, and sustainable solutions to address the root causes of conflict.

In its recent event, the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security highlights that Syrian women have faced persistent barriers to inclusion in formal negotiations. However, their leadership in civil society organizations and informal peace talks has fostered grassroots-level reconciliation and humanitarian response. Women have been pivotal in organizing dialogue forums, supporting displaced communities, and advocating for gender-sensitive political transitions. Their involvement in peacebuilding has demonstrated the necessity of a human-centered approach, ensuring that the needs of affected populations are prioritized in negotiations.

Women's organizations have been at the forefront of humanitarian response efforts, providing crucial services in war-affected communities. [Women Now for Development](#) has established

safe spaces for women and children, offering psychological support, vocational training, and legal assistance. These centers have served as hubs for community resilience, empowering women to take on leadership roles in their communities. Additionally, [the White Helmets](#) have expanded their programs to include female volunteers in unexploded ordnance (UXO) removal and emergency response, ensuring women's active participation in civilian protection efforts. This initiative has been significant in areas heavily affected by explosive remnants of war, where female first responders play a vital role in saving lives and providing medical assistance.

Despite facing significant risks, female healthcare workers have also taken [the lead](#) in providing reproductive and maternal healthcare services amid ongoing crises. [Reports](#) highlight that women-led medical teams have been instrumental in ensuring continued access to healthcare, particularly in hard-to-reach areas where formal healthcare systems have collapsed. Moreover, [grassroots women's initiatives](#) have mobilized food distribution networks, supported internally displaced populations, and facilitated education programs for children in conflict zones.

Despite these efforts, women remain largely excluded from high-level negotiations. The *Washington Institute* reports that [patriarchal](#) norms and political dynamics continue to sideline women's voices in formal peace talks, making their contributions undervalued. Women's organizations frequently [encounter](#) security threats, including targeted harassment and violence against activists, further limiting their ability to engage in advocacy efforts. Furthermore, financial constraints and [underfunded](#) women-led initiatives pose significant obstacles to the sustainability of their work, and international funding remains inconsistent.

A significant [barrier](#) to women's political participation is the persistence of patriarchal power structures within governance, which continue to exclude women from key decision-making roles. While women have actively contributed to peacebuilding and community resilience, their influence is often overlooked in formal negotiations. The ongoing conflict and political instability further restrict their ability to shape policies that impact their lives and communities.

International organizations such as [WILPF](#) (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom) and *UN Women* have actively supported Syrian women's participation in peace processes. These efforts are guided by frameworks like [UN Security Council Resolution 1325](#),

which emphasizes the importance of women's involvement in conflict resolution and post-conflict governance. Advocacy efforts have [focused](#) on integrating gender-sensitive policies into humanitarian aid distribution, economic recovery plans, and long-term reconstruction efforts.

Syrian women's contributions to peacebuilding highlight the necessity of integrating gender perspectives into conflict-resolution efforts. Strengthening these efforts requires sustained international support, legal reforms, and societal recognition of women's indispensable role in creating lasting peace. In the words of one interviewee, **"I see women's efforts in peacebuilding as important for achieving fundamental change and democracy in the country. Their role will be vital and diverse in restoring peace."** The ongoing humanitarian crisis in Syria has underscored the resilience of women-led initiatives, demonstrating their ability to drive meaningful change despite immense challenges. A sustainable peace process must prioritize women's full participation in negotiations and post-conflict governance. Without meaningful inclusion, peace agreements risk reinforcing existing gender inequalities and failing to address the needs of vulnerable populations. By recognizing and institutionalizing women's roles in rebuilding Syria through inclusive governance and gender-responsive policies, policymakers can lay the foundation for a more just, inclusive, and lasting peace; as one interviewee stated, **"Women bring valuable insights that can enhance the effectiveness of peace efforts."**

Most Recent Developments

Since the collapse of the Assad regime, Ahmad al-Sharaa has [released thousands of prisoners](#), including women who were reportedly sexually assaulted inside the [infamous Saydnaya prison](#). Many women allegedly gave birth inside the prison to children who had never seen the outside world before the fall of Assad. With the regime's collapse, the refugees and internally displaced persons have begun trickling back into their home cities/towns, with many countries starting to [deny further asylum requests](#) or sending asylees back to Syria. The majority of the refugees and internally displaced are women, children, and the elderly.

Multiple organizations, including the White Hats organization, [found mass graves](#) after the collapse of the Assad regime. These discoveries will shed accuracy on years of estimates of

death tolls from not only the fighting but also the number of women, children, and men killed by the Assad regime itself.

Most recently, Syrian leader Ahmed al-Sharaa has [declared](#) the beginning of a ‘new chapter’ in the country’s history following the enactment of a constitutional declaration that outlines a five-year transitional framework and affirms protections for women’s rights and freedom of expression. Women are impacted differently from their male counterparts due to more than a decade of trauma, reported mass sexual assaults by both government and non-state actors, sexual slavery, forced conception, internal displacement, or flight as refugees. The multitude of issues affecting Syrian society will be challenging to tackle, and the major mental health issues to address on a mass scale will be crucial to the country’s future stability. Currently, even in refugee camps, there are not enough consistent services like mental health initiatives, let alone nutrition, conditions that exacerbate the short-term problems the Sharaa administration will have to solve.

Conclusion

As Syria enters a transitional period under the leadership of Ahmed al-Sharaa, it faces the immense challenge of reconstructing a nation shattered by more than a decade of civil war, foreign interference, widespread atrocities, and mass displacement. Among those most affected by the conflict are Syrian women, who have endured extraordinary levels of suffering, including sexual violence, forced displacement, economic marginalization, and the collapse of essential healthcare and social systems. Many have lost their families, homes, and livelihoods, yet continue to shoulder the burden of recovery and reconstruction.

However, Syrian women have not been passive victims. They have been powerful agents of resilience and change, organizing humanitarian relief, advocating for justice, and challenging gender-based discrimination in the face of rooted adversity. Still, their leadership remains largely sidelined in formal political negotiations and national rebuilding efforts.

For Syria to achieve lasting peace and reconciliation for its population, the inclusion of women in every stage of the transitional process should be more than symbolic. It should be structural, including legal quotas and the institutionalization of women’s representation. Female experiences, insights, and leadership are essential to healing a traumatized society and

preventing a return to cycles of violence and exclusion. Investment in women's health, education, livelihoods, and political participation is not only a moral imperative but a cornerstone of sustainable recovery.

Whether this transitional period marks a genuine departure from past cycles of violence and exclusion depends on Syria's willingness to center women in its future. A new chapter is only truly possible if it is written with and by Syrian women, grounded in equity, shaped by their leadership, and sustained by a commitment to dignity and human rights for all.

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