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Freedom in the World 2014 - Syria

Trend Arrow:

Syria received a downward trend arrow due to the worsening conditions for civilians, the increased targeting of churches for destruction and kidnapping of clergy, the implementation of harsh Sharia-inspired restrictions in some areas, and unchecked violence against women, including the use of rape as a weapon of war.

Overview:

The civil war that started in the wake of a peaceful 2011 uprising continued unabated in 2013. By year's end it had produced more than 2 million refugees, 5 million internally displaced persons, and nearly 130,000 fatalities, according to the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

While the demise of the Syrian regime had been predicted by many observers, it survived and even made some gains in the fighting during the year. President Bashar al-Assad raised the possibility that he would run for reelection in 2014, and he was increasingly supported by minority groups in Syria as they grew alarmed by the rise of radical Islamism in the country.

The moderate armed opposition in Syria was mainly represented by the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a loose alliance of units founded by those who had participated in the nonviolent uprising in 2011 as well as defecting army officers and soldiers. The radical Islamist opposition was splintered among many groups. The National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC), the latest political structure formed by the opposition in exile to support the uprising, remained ineffective in 2013.

The regime and the opposition drew varying levels of assistance from allies in the international community. On the regime's side were Russia, Iran, and the Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah, which actively participated in the fighting in key areas. The opposition was supported by regional states including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey, in addition to France, Britain, and the United States, though the latter countries avoided providing meaningful or direct shipments of arms due to concerns that they would fall into the hands of radical Islamists. The U.S. government threatened to conduct a punitive missile strike on the Assad regime following its use of chemical weapons against civilians in August, but the proposal faltered amid a lack of congressional support and a British parliamentary vote against participation. Russia helped broker a deal under which al-Assad began handing over his forces' chemical weapons to international experts, though the regime's overall military campaign was not affected by the agreement, and the aborted U.S. attack reportedly demoralized moderate opposition forces.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: -2 / 40 (-1) [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 0 / 12

Al-Assad took power after the death of his father, longtime president Hafez al-Assad, in 2000 and secured a second seven-year term in 2007 with 97.6 percent of the vote in a tightly controlled referendum. Constitutional revisions adopted in 2012 provided for future presidential elections, replacing the presidential referendum system, in which the sole candidate was nominated by the ruling Baath Party. However, among other restrictions, candidates would need support from at least 35 lawmakers to qualify. During a media interview in October 2013, al-Assad said he was considering a run for reelection in 2014, despite a two-term limit introduced in the 2012 constitution.

Members of the 250-seat, unicameral People's Council serve four-year terms and hold little independent legislative power. Almost all power rests in the executive branch. The last legislative elections were held in May 2012 amid open warfare and an opposition boycott. The Baath Party and allied factions took 168 seats, progovernment independents secured 77, and a nominal opposition group won 5.

The rebel-held parts of the country continued to lack an effective or unified governing structure in 2013, but the SOC, formed in 2012, was regarded as the international face of the moderate opposition. Made up of delegates from opposition groups in exile, it has been recognized as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people by the Arab League, the United States, and many European countries, formally taking Syria's seat in the Arab League in March 2013. The SOC elected Moaz al-Khatib as its first president, but he resigned in April 2013. George Sabra served as interim president until Ahmad al-Jarba was elected in July. Ghassan Hitto, who was elected as the coalition's first prime minister in March, stepped down in July, citing his inability to form a government. Ahmed Tumei was named to succeed him in September and formed a cabinet two months later. Nevertheless, the SOC's links to local leaders inside Syria remained tenuous.

While provisional local councils in many rebel-held areas have held rudimentary elections, the proceedings are undermined by ongoing government shelling and other insecurity, minimal turnout, and competing sources of authority, such as jihadist groups. Local council elections were held in Deir Ezzour in February 2013 and for the Aleppo governorate in March, though the latter voting was conducted across the Turkish border by delegates from municipal committees.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 0 / 16

In the formal political system, parties based on religious, tribal, or regional affiliation are banned. Until a 2011 decree allowed the formation of new parties, the only legal factions were the Baath Party and its several small coalition partners. Independent candidates are heavily vetted and closely allied with the regime. A 2012 constitutional referendum relaxed rules regarding the participation of non-Baathist parties, but the armed conflict and ongoing state restrictions have continued to limit political activity in practice.

Political activity in rebel-held areas, while more diverse, is also minimal. Local councils are typically sponsored or appointed by prominent families and armed groups, and their work is dominated by pressing humanitarian needs and basic service delivery.

Nationwide, the political views of various segments of the population are largely overridden by whatever armed group controls a given area. Territory is held by a multitude of armed factions, ranging from the government's forces and allies on the one hand, to moderate, Islamist, radical jihadist, and autonomous Kurdish units on the other. The size, strength, and affiliations of these factions were all in flux during 2013, making any assessment highly provisional.

The government and its security forces are dominated by the extended Assad family. Maher al-Assad, Bashar's brother, commands the Fourth Armored Division, an elite military unit tasked with protecting the regime, and his cousins head units responsible for presidential security and security in the capital. While the ruling family and its inner circle belong to the Alawite minority, the outer circle of the Baath Party and state apparatus is composed of Sunni allies, including Prime Minister Wael Nader al-Halqi and Deputy Prime Ministers Walid Muallem and Fahd Jassem al-Freij. In April 2013, al-Halqi survived an assassination attempt in Damascus. Al-Assad also has allies among the Sunni religious elite; one such cleric, Sheikh Ramadan al-Bouti, was killed in a bomb attack in March. The regime is reportedly assisted by Iranian forces and Shiite militias from Syria and across the region.

The Supreme Military Command (SMC), formed in late 2012, represents the moderate armed opposition in its dealings with the international community. Its chief of staff is Salim Idriss, a former general who defected from the Syrian army. The FSA leadership is incorporated into the SMC to the extent that the two names can be used interchangeably. The FSA consists of roughly 30 armed groups, including some of the more moderate or nationalist Sunni Islamist factions fighting in Syria. The group receives financial and political support and limited arms supplies from Arab and Western states.

The Sunni Islamist groups fighting in Syria include both those with a national focus and global jihadists. Among the more nationally oriented Islamist groups are the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, founded in September 2012, and the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF), established in December 2012. While such groups tend to support the creation of an Islamic state in Syria based on Sharia (Islamic law), they generally do not call for the creation of a transnational Islamic caliphate. SIF leaders are not incorporated into the SMC structure, and the group receives funding from wealthy private donors in the Gulf.

There are two groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda in Syria: Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) and the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS). JN, which was designated as a terrorist organization by the United States in December 2012, aims to establish an Islamic caliphate based in Greater Syria, and its members include fighters from around the world. JN sometimes collaborates with other antigovernment groups in Syria on an ad hoc basis, reportedly including the FSA, but both JN and ISIS have also fought with opposition forces.

Kurdish militias have operated autonomously in northeastern Syria, reportedly clashing with Islamist factions and cooperating with other groups and allegedly with the regime in some instances.

C. Functioning of Government: 0 / 12 (-1)

Even before the armed conflict, Syrian government institutions lacked public accountability and were plagued by corruption. Those who question their policies and actions are often imprisoned or otherwise censored or punished. Members of the ruling family and their inner circle are said to own and control a major portion of the Syrian economy. The president's own fortune has been estimated at \$550 million to \$1.5 billion, while his cousin Rami Makhlouf is said to be worth \$5 billion. Makhlouf was designated as profiting from public corruption by the U.S. Treasury Department in 2008. Syria was ranked 168 out of 177 on Transparency International's 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Faced with serious financial and economic constraints as a result of the war, the government made some efforts to impose internal discipline in 2013. It approved a draft anticorruption law in August, and from June to August close to 100 civil servants were dismissed over charges of corruption. The head of the terrorism court was appointed in August to lead the anticorruption agency, known as the Central Commission for Monitoring and Inspection. Despite such moves, there is little or no transparency regarding the use of aid from allied states and other forms of assistance.

Corruption is also present in rebel-held areas, albeit on a smaller scale. Some rebel commanders, including from the FSA, have been accused of looting or seizing goods and selling them in Turkey. In addition, local administrators and activists complain that little of the international aid reportedly given to opposition representatives abroad seems to reach them, raising suspicions of graft.

Discretionary Political Rights Question B: -2 / 0

The armed conflict has grown increasingly sectarian over time, with Sunni civilians bearing the brunt of government attacks, some Islamist factions persecuting minorities and secularists, and civilians of all confessions seeking safety among their respective groups. The result has been significant and ongoing changes in the demographics of the country.

Civil Liberties: 3 / 60 (-4)

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 1 / 16 (-1)

Freedom of expression is heavily restricted in Syria. Most domestic news outlets are either state controlled or aligned with rebel factions, and access to information is made difficult by both the opposition and regime forces. At least 28 journalists were killed in 2013, the majority of whom were Syrian. In addition, foreign, Syrian, and other Arab journalists were abducted during the year. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, by early October at least 14 journalists were missing. Reporters Without Borders noted that month that 37 foreign journalists had disappeared since the beginning of the uprising, more than 60 Syrian journalists had been kidnapped or arrested by rebels, and more than 200 had been arrested by the regime. However, some kidnapped journalists have been returned to their families.

Because professional journalists do not have access to many areas, citizens have stepped in to fill the void of information. They have used social media, especially Facebook and YouTube, to upload reports and videos of human rights violations by both the regime and rebels. Government interrogators now reportedly ask detainees for access to Facebook or Skype accounts rather than the names of collaborators. The regime has stopped trying to block Facebook and uses it for surveillance, monitoring the pages of opponents and dissidents.

Meanwhile, the progovernment Syrian Electronic Army has mounted a series of cyberattacks on opposition supporters, activists, and news outlets, including major foreign media.

While the constitution mandates that the president be a Muslim, there is no state religion in Syria, and historically freedom of worship has been respected to a greater extent than most other rights. However, the government tightly monitors mosques and controls the appointment of Muslim religious leaders. The war has increased sectarian hostility and polarization in both government and rebel-held areas, particularly as jihadist elements gained prominence. Two Orthodox bishops were kidnapped in Aleppo in March 2013, and churches were torched in cities such as Raqqa and smaller towns such as Tal Abyad. Alawite civilians have been killed by radical Islamists: at least 67 were massacred in progovernment villages in the Latakia governorate in August 2013.

Academic freedom is heavily restricted. University professors in government-held areas have been dismissed or imprisoned for expressing dissent, and some have been killed in response to their outspoken support for regime opponents. Education in general has been greatly disrupted by the civil war, with school facilities regularly attacked or commandeered by combatants.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 0 / 12

Freedom of assembly is harshly restricted. Any opposition protests in government-held areas are met with gunfire, mass arrests, and torture. Some rebel factions have also been severely intolerant of civilian demonstrations. Foreign journalists in Damascus reported an incident in May 2013 in which rebel fighters opened fire on a small progovernment demonstration.

The regime generally denies registration to nongovernmental organizations with reformist or human rights missions, and regularly conducts raids and searches to detain civic and political activists. An umbrella group of grassroots activists known as the Local Coordination Committees (LCC) emerged at the time of the 2011 uprising, organizing and monitoring the activities of the peaceful protest movement and documenting human rights abuses. However, LCC figures and other activists have faced violence and intimidation by armed groups. Human rights attorney Razan Zaitouneh, an LCC cofounder, was abducted along with three others near Damascus in December 2013.

Professional syndicates in state-held areas are controlled by the Baath Party, and all labor unions must belong to the General Federation of Trade Unions, a nominally independent grouping that the government uses to control union activity. The economic and political pressures of the war have made normal labor relations virtually impossible across the country.

F. Rule of Law: 0 / 16

Government interference in the civil judiciary is forbidden by the constitution, but all judges and prosecutors must belong to the Baath Party and are beholden to the political leadership in practice. Military officers can try civilians, both in conventional military courts and in field courts. While civilians may appeal military court decisions to the military chamber of the Court of Cassation, military judges are not independent or impartial, as they are subordinate to the military command. The Supreme State Security Court (SSSC), which heard national security cases and featured sweeping restrictions on due process, was disbanded in 2011, but there have been no notable improvements in the rights of defendants.

Human rights violations have increased during the armed conflict, reaching the level of war crimes and crimes against humanity, according to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. While abuses have been committed by all sides, the bulk of violations have been attributed to the Assad regime.

Government forces in 2013 engaged in the indiscriminate killing of civilians using air strikes, artillery bombardments, and chemical weapons, most notably a chemical attack near Damascus in August that killed hundreds of people and injured thousands. There is also evidence of mass executions by progovernment forces, including operations in the towns of Al-Bayda and Baniyas in May that killed nearly 250 people.

Government forces are responsible for the arrest and torture of tens of thousands of people since the start of the uprising in 2011. Human Rights Watch in 2012 identified 27 facilities where people have been subjected to more than 20 types of torture, including beatings, torture with electricity or battery acid, rape, and mock execution. Most victims are men between 18 and 35 years of age, but women, the elderly, and children are also detained and tortured. Rape is being used as an instrument of war, and while most reported victims are women, men and boys have also been raped. Human rights groups report that the overwhelming majority of documented sexual assaults in Syria are perpetrated by government forces and their allies.

Rebel and jihadist forces have been accused of committing summary executions; indiscriminate killings of civilians, particularly of Alawites and other minorities; and high-profile incidents of torture and mutilation of captured combatants. Some Islamist rebels and jihadists have also set up so-called Sharia courts in their areas, imposing crude punishments, including execution, for perceived religious offenses by civilians.

The Kurdish minority has historically faced discrimination and severe restrictions on cultural and linguistic expression. As many as 300,000 Syrian Kurds were long denied citizenship, passports, identity cards, and birth certificates, preventing them from owning land, obtaining government employment, and voting. While the government pledged in 2011 to extend citizenship rights to this population, conditions for Kurds remained harsh, and Kurdish militias have taken up arms to defend their areas amid the civil war.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 2 / 16 (-2)

The proliferation of military and rebel checkpoints, heavy combat, and general insecurity have severely restricted freedom of movement and shipments of vital supplies since 2011, affecting resident civilians, the internally displaced, and those attempting to flee abroad. The Assad regime has systematically blockaded regions controlled by rebels, with especially tight cordons surrounding districts under military siege or assault. Such tactics have led to widespread malnutrition and disease, including an outbreak of polio, which had previously been eradicated in Syria. Rebel and jihadist forces have also intermittently blocked shipments of aid and medicine for civilians.

Syria was ranked 133 out of 136 countries in the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report. In addition to sexual violence associated with the armed conflict, domestic abuse is endemic. Rates of early marriage are reportedly high, with displaced and refugee families in particular marrying off young daughters as a perceived safeguard against rape, a means of covering up such crimes, or a response to economic pressure. Forced prostitution and human trafficking are also serious problems among these populations.

Women faced legal and other forms of discrimination even before the uprising. While Syria was one of the first Arab countries to grant female suffrage, women have been underrepresented in Syrian politics and government. They hold just 12 percent of the seats in the legislature, though some have been appointed to senior positions, including one of the two vice presidential posts. A husband may request that the Interior Ministry block his wife from traveling abroad, and women, unlike men, are generally barred from taking their children out of the country without proof of the spouse's permission. Perpetrators of killings classified as "honor crimes" are punished with reduced sentences ranging from five to seven years in prison. Personal status law for Muslims is governed by Sharia and is discriminatory in marriage, divorce, and inheritance matters. Church law governs personal status issues for Christians, in some cases barring divorce. According to the penal code, "unnatural sexual intercourse" is punishable with up to three years in prison.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

[Full Methodology](#)

2014 Scores

Status

Not Free

Freedom Rating

(1 = best, 7 = worst)

7.0

Civil Liberties

(1 = best, 7 = worst)

7

Political Rights

(1 = best, 7 = worst)

7

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