

# Facts on the European Dimension of Displacement and Asylum: Syria

March 2016

## OVERVIEW

### Demographic Structure

Population (pre-conflict)	21 million
Population	16.6 million (-21%)
Ethnic groups	89% Arabs, 6% Kurds, 2% Armenians, Circassians, Turkmens and Turks
Languages	Arabic (official language), Kurdish, Armenian, Aramaic, Circassian
Religion	97% Muslim (74% Sunni, 13% Alawite, Ismailite and Shiite) 10% Christian, 3% Druze
Median age (EU 28)	23.2 years (42.2 years)

Figures are estimates for 2015, except <sup>1</sup>estimate for 2014 based on population data of the Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR) and <sup>2</sup> estimates of the SCPR for GDP growth from 2010 to 2014; <sup>3</sup> DG TRADE of the European Commission 2014; arrows: change from previous year; \$ = USD

### Economics & Employment

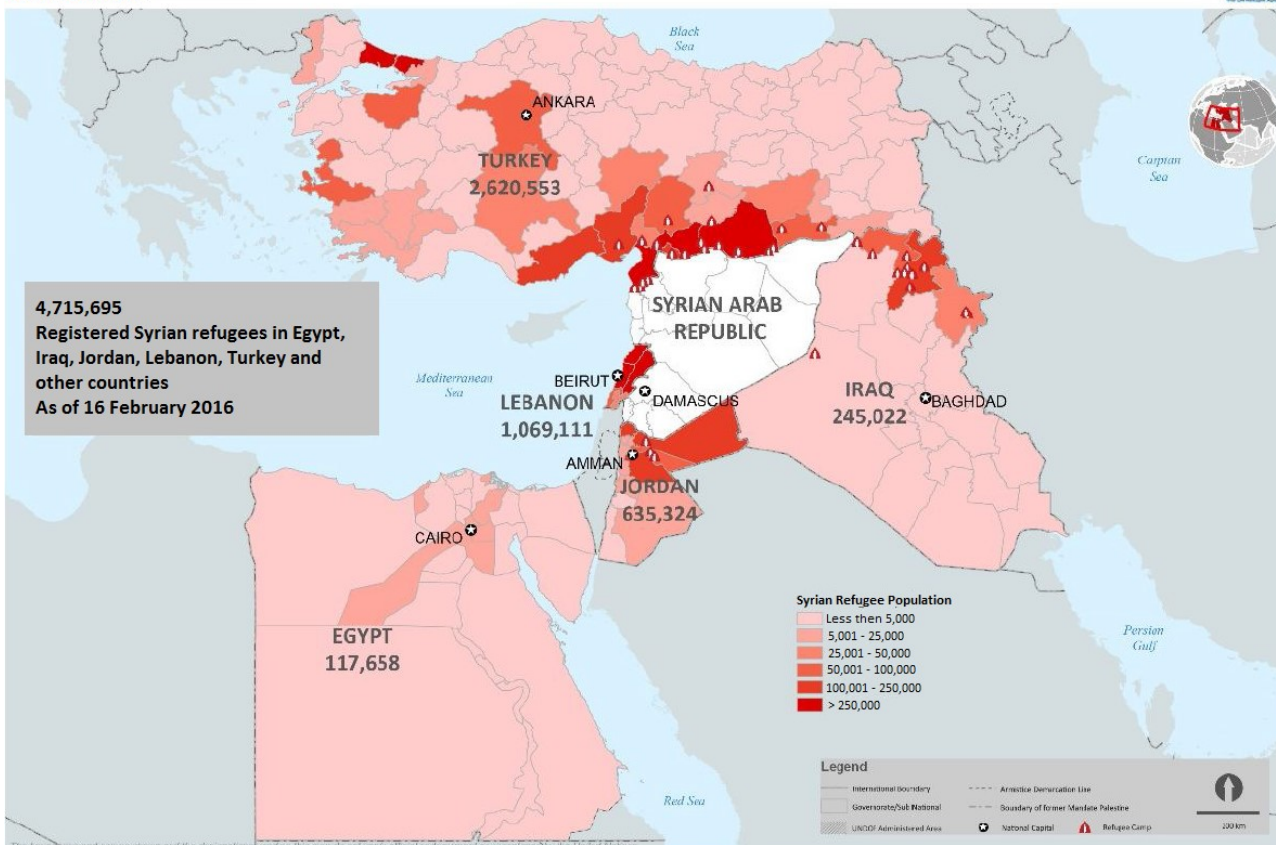
GDP (per capita)	\$22.8 Mrd. (\$1,336) <sup>1</sup>	↓
GDP growth	-62.0 % <sup>2</sup>	↓
GNI (PPP) (per capita)	(NA)	
Inflation (CPI)	33.6 %	↑
Unemployment	57.7 %	↑
Youth unemployment (15-24 years)	(NA)	
FDI (inflows)	(NA)	
Share of EU 28	(NA)	
Imports of goods	\$19.1 Mrd. <sup>3</sup>	↑
Share of EU 28	4.7 % <sup>3</sup>	↓
Exports of goods	\$12.4 Mrd. <sup>3</sup>	↓
Share of EU 28	1.1 % <sup>3</sup>	↑

### Political System and Relations with the EU

Type of state/government	De jure (2012 constitution): republic / semi presidential system De facto: disintegration into six areas ruled by different parties
Degree of democratization	Bertelsmann Stiftung, Transformation Index 2016 Democracy status: 1.7 (out of 10, higher = better), failing state Rank: 128/129, comparable to Eritrea and Somalia
Human rights and protection of minorities	Amnesty International, Amnesty Report 2016: Syria <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regime forces and non-state combatants are regularly violating humanitarian law and are committing human rights abuses as well as war crimes.</li> <li>Most groups are targeting civilians deliberately by attacking residential areas and health facilities, partly with weapons systems which are internationally condemned, and by conducting sieges for long periods of time.</li> <li>Regime forces have arbitrarily detained thousands of people of which some have been tortured systematically while others have gone missing indefinitely.</li> <li>Non-state groups, especially fighters of the self-proclaimed "Islamic State" (IS), are conducting summary executions, suicide bombings and are systematically destroying cultural goods.</li> </ul>
Corruption	Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2014 Rank: 154, comparable to Eritrea and Yemen
Freedom of the press	Freedom House, Freedom of the Press Index 2015 Status: not free Score: 90 (out of 100, lower = better), comparable to Iran and Cuba
Relations with the European Union	Eligible for participation in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP); however, in 2011 all bilateral, regional, financial and technical cooperation and support programs were halted, the Association Agreement negotiations were stopped and extensive sanctions were put in place.

**Syria Situation Map**

Syrian Refugees



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<http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/regionalupdates/Syrian%20refugees%20Inter-Agency%20Regional%20Update%20%28January%202016%29.pdf>

**SITUAION OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN SYRIA AND ITS NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES**

Category	Country of origin
Number of refugees in Syria	Some 8.7 million Syrians are considered internally displaced persons (IDPs). They are residing mostly in Aleppo, Damascus, Homs and Hama (together around 25 percent). All in all, 13.5 million people (81 percent of the entire population) are in need of humanitarian aid. Some 450,000 Palestinians are still living in Syria. Most would want to flee to Jordan and Lebanon, which however will not let them enter the country.
Number of registered Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries and the EU since 2011	Some 4.7 million Syrians are registered in neighbouring countries. 2.62 million in Turkey 246,000 in Iraq (mostly in northern Iraq) 1.07 million in Lebanon 119,000 in Egypt 638,000 in Jordan 28.000 in North Africa 552,639 Syrians have applied for asylum in an EU member state.
Housing for refugees	Around 25 percent of all IDPs in Syria live in camps and collective shelters, the others live in private accommodation in their host communities. In neighbouring countries 90 per cent of all Syrian refugees live in private accommodation.
Status of refugees in Syria	IDPs do not enjoy a special status and are suffering from the same humanitarian problems as the rest of the population. Only 30 per cent of all Syrians have clean drinking water, more than half of the population is in dire need of food security, some 42 percent lack access to basic medical care and around two million children are not able to attend school.

Status of refugees in neighbouring countries	Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries want the right to work and access to education. These are two main findings from a comprehensive survey by the Danish Refugee Council. In <i>Turkey</i> , Syrians are able to apply for a work permit since January 2016, as long as they have spent 6 months in the country. In Jordan, only 1.7 percent of all refugees are in possession of a work permit due to steep administrative barriers. In Lebanon, Syrians are not at all allowed to work. Moreover, some 700,000 Syrian children (equals 60 percent) do not have any access to education.
Funding	UN organizations have appealed for US\$ 7.73 billion for all of their activities in Syria and its neighbouring countries in 2016. Included in this sum are US\$ 1.62 billion for the UN refugee agency (UNHCR), which so far has received little over 9 percent of the funds.
Irregular border crossings into the EU	Approx. 487,000 registered Syrian refugees have reached the EU via the Mediterranean in 2015, according to UNHCR. In 2016, 45,200 Syrians arrived in Europe so far.

**Five years of civil war have driven Syria into chaos, now the conflict gets moving.**

The Syrian civil war started with the mass demonstrations which broke out in the wake of the *Arabellion* in Syria in March 2011. Yet Assad’s regime did not respond to the protesters’ major demands, which included, in particular, more political and economic participation. On the contrary: the troops of ruler Assad crushed the demonstrations with great brutality, thus provoking peaceful mass demonstrations to escalate into a civil war. The balance of the past five years is devastating: more than 250,000 people were killed. More than half of the population, a good 13.5 million people, are on the run, 8.7 million of them within Syria and 4.7 million in the neighbouring countries Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt and Libya. And more than 900,000 Syrians have, to date, filed an asylum request in Europe.

The main responsibility for this humanitarian catastrophe lies, in particular, with the Assad regime, on the one hand, and the so-called “Islamic State (IS)”, on the other. Their war strategy includes the deliberate killing and starving of the civil population, the wide destruction of residential areas, and the systematic displacement of ethnic and religious groups, which they consider as potential trouble-makers or adversaries.

In consequence, large parts of Syria have been destroyed. The World Bank estimates the costs of reconstruction at more than €150 billion. The collapsing state *de facto* currently consists of several territories, in particular the area held by Assad’s regime, the territory of the “Islamic State” reaching into Iraq, Kurdish territories as well as districts which are being autonomously administrated by diverse rebel groups (cf. map).

***From civil to proxy war***

The local war parties are backed by diverse states and actors following diametrically opposed interests in Syria and the Middle East in general.

Saudi-Arabia and Qatar are trying to reinforce the Sunni majority in Syria and push back Iran’s influence in the region. They are opposed by Tehran, siding with the Alawite minority (Shiite spectrum). Moreover, Syria is of great relevance for Iranians as direct supply channels into Lebanon to the Hezbollah militia are going through the country. Turkey, first and foremost, wants to block out a connected Kurdish territory at its border, and Ankara supports secular as well as Salafist rebel groups. The US, on the other hand, do not want to be drawn into the civil war, while at the same time taking the fight, first and foremost, to “IS”. In addition, Washington wants to support its allies Israel, Turkey and Saudi-Arabia and to contain Iran’s and Russia’s positions of power. Moscow, on the contrary, wants to participate in shaping what happens in the Middle East and maintain a big military base in the Middle East.

***Change of paradigms in the Syria conflict***

Since the summer of 2015, a change of paradigms has taken place in the Syrian civil war. This has four important reasons:

Firstly, due to the flight of hundreds of thousands of Syrians to Europe, the humanitarian misery in Syria has become the focus of international attention.

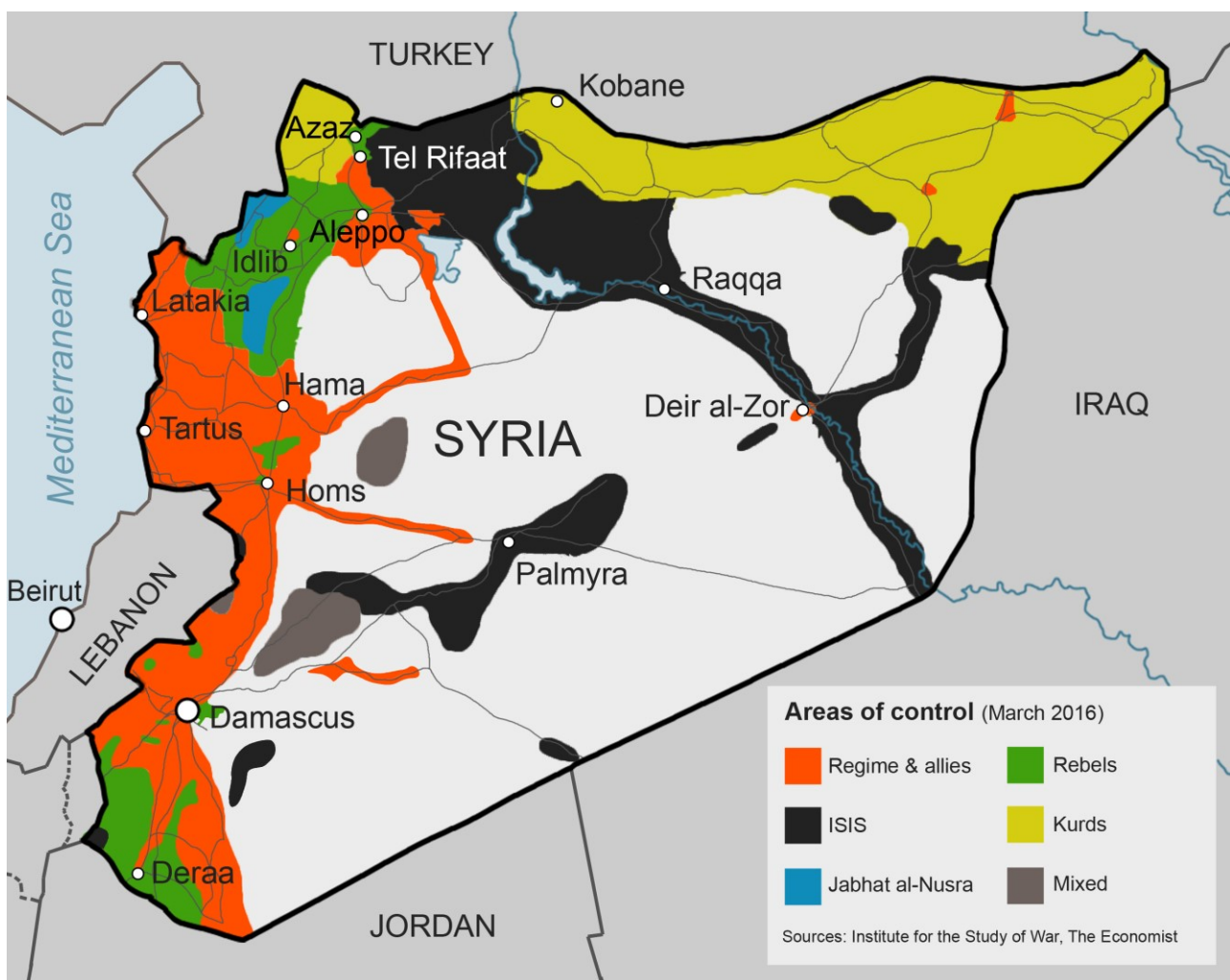
Secondly, the Iran nuclear deal has been used to involve Tehran into negotiations about regional conflicts.

Thirdly, as a result of the terror attacks of “IS” in Paris and Istanbul, the West has reinforced its air raids on the territory of “IS” in Syria.

And last but not least, since the intervention of the Russian air force side by side with his own troops and supported by Hezbollah fighters, Iraqi-Shiite militia and Iranian Revolutionary Guards Assad has been able to gain large territories from the secular opposition (Free Syrian Army) and Islamist rebel groups.

These factors urge international diplomacy to increase their efforts to contain or solve the conflict in Syria. Directed jointly by Moscow and Washington, a political agenda (Resolution 2254 of the UN Security Council) and a “cessation of hostilities”, largely kept since 27 February 2016, were agreed upon.

Yet the ceasefire is fragile and entering the political process is difficult. This is mainly due to a different understanding about who is a terrorist and who is not. Continuing the combat against the “IS” is undisputed. Equally, the jihadist al-Nusra front is to be fought. However, the al-Nusra territories overlap with those of other rebel groups, which, by contrast, are taking part in the peace negotiations. The ceasefire is also kept by the so-called “Islamic Front”, including mainly Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam and supported by Saudi-Arabia and Qatar. Yet this “Islamic Front” is also a terror militia in Putin’s and Assad’s eyes just as Assad considers any opposition a terrorist act. In consequence, the issue of Assad’s personal future is hanging like the sword of Damocles over future negotiations in Syria.





**How to contain or even solve the conflict?**

Given the diametrically opposed interests of both the war parties and the external actors, the ceasefire is likely to remain fragile. Fighting will probably flare up regularly. The negotiations between regime and opposition, which the United Nations are striving for, could be dragging on for a long time, with the secular opposition being worn down between the Assad regime and "IS".

Nevertheless we want to make several proposals which could contribute to improving the current situation and giving Syria a perspective for a new beginning:

***Improving the humanitarian situation***

The USA and the EU should continue their intensive diplomatic efforts together with Russia and the regional powers. They ought to aim at maintaining the ceasefire or restoring it quickly after a potential violation.

When weapons have fallen silent, aid organisations operating in Syria will ultimately be able to advance into those territories which are difficult to reach. Yet it will also be important to make all-encompassing technical and financial equipment available to all UN organisations dealing with Syria, from the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) to the World Food Programme (WFP). Until the end of 2015, the UNHCR could ultimately cover only 62% of its financial needs for its activities in Syria and the neighbouring countries. A task force of the four states Germany, Great Britain, Norway and Kuwait, which jointly organised the donor conference in London on 4 February 2016, could be established to keep an eye on whether the financial pledges made are actually being fulfilled.

If overland supplies to needy persons, refugees and persons in places under siege in Syria remain impossible despite the ceasefire, the relevant organisations would have to resort to air drops. This will, however, often need to be coordinated with Russia whose army is technically able to control the Syrian airspace.

The infrastructure in the refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Northern Iraq and Turkey must be improved quickly so that Syrians who have already fled from the country are not forced to embark on the dangerous journey towards Europe. The

international community ought to provide the seed money for small enterprises and shops as well as support the establishment of free-of-charge schools and training centres. Now as before, more than half of all Syrian children in the neighbouring countries ultimately cannot go to school. Municipalities in the vicinity of the camps ought to be involved in the programmes in order also to gain the support of the local population.

Only 10% of Syrians reside in refugee camps in their neighbouring countries. Therefore, extensive measures are required to improve the legal status of Syrians in general. In concrete terms, residence of Syrian refugees in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon ought to be legalised insofar as to enable Syrians to rent flats, to work, take out insurances and send their children to school. We are well aware that Jordan and Lebanon need extensive external support, given the immense number of refugees in proportion to their own populations. Yet after all, since January 2016, Syrians can apply for a work permit in Turkey if they have lived in the country for six months.

If the ceasefire continued, means for the reconstruction of residential areas, hospitals, schools, small enterprises, water and electricity supplies in the Syrian cities and villages of the provinces close to the borders to Turkey and Jordan should rapidly be provided. This could contribute to stabilisation and strengthen the hope to stay or even return to Syria. In many places, a civil society grown over the last years can be relied on.

For those Syrians willing to return from Europe, programmes could be set up to train them for the management of public administration, political parties, the judiciary, the media and civil-society organisations so that they can actively participate in reconstructing their home country.

***Creating more opportunities for participation***

Most Syrians will probably return home only if they can be sure of their personal safety and see clear signs for the new Syria developing towards a really secular, pluralist and inclusive state under the rule of law.

The bad governance of the Assad regime, the incredible war crimes, the bitter fight, the

extraordinary sufferings, the escape of more than half the population and the hatred stoked among many ethnic and religious groups have created a deep mistrust – a heavy burden for a new start.

This mistrust could be reduced, were it possible under the auspices of the United Nations to declare security guarantees for all ethnic and confessional groupings. They ought to aim at allaying the minorities' fears of the Sunni Arab majority while, at the same time, ensuring that the Sunnites, to date marginalised, can participate in the social, political and economic life of the country.

To make sure that there is an opposition capable of organising itself for the coming peace negotiations, the West is asked more strongly to support the secular opposition in Syria politically, diplomatically and financially rather than to leave this to Turkey, Saudi-Arabia and Qatar alone.

Equal participation of the Sunni tribes in the new Syria could also drive them away from the al-Nusra front and "IS". Moreover, the "IS" myth needs to be exploded and its propaganda on the Internet must be more resolutely countered by facts.

A face change, not to be confused with a regime change, could be a signal for the new start: the resignation of the ruling Assad and Makhoul families, combined with a pluralisation of the political spectrum and the preservation of the still existing state structures. For many Syrians, not just for most of the opposition, the Assad and Makhoul families embody the dictatorship of secret services, cronyism, barrel bombs and chemical weapons.

For moral reasons, "IS" leader al-Baghdadi and ruler Assad should actually also be indicted for war crimes and crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court in The Hague. However, for formal legal reasons this is not possible because Syria has not signed the Rome Statute. More energy must, therefore, be invested into creating mechanisms making it possible to come to terms with the Syria conflict.

The new start in Syria needs many Blue Helmets and experts of the United Nations to monitor and guarantee that agreements and political transformation be implemented. Inclusion, transparency and the rule of law are important factors to build up confidence. All Syrians including the refugees must be able to vote.

### ***Keeping up and extending the regional approach of confidence-building and conflict resolution***

The International Syria Support Group (ISSG), consisting of 17 states negotiating under the direction of Washington and Moscow, must remain active to maintain the ceasefire and accompany the political process.

Keeping the regional powers Iran, Saudi-Arabia and Turkey jointly involved in solving the conflict in Syria is of utmost importance. Even though Tehran and Riyadh broke off their diplomatic relations in January 2016, the gap between Iran and Saudi-Arabia must still be narrowed, not just to come closer to pacify Syria but also to relieve or even solve the related conflicts in Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen.

The ISSG would also have the potential to be a future nucleus of a system of security and cooperation in the Gulf region.

In terms of *realpolitik*, intensifying relations between the EU and Turkey is also necessary. Cooperation in the refugee issue and the opening of further chapters in the accession negotiations have started in November 2015. Maybe Brussels can use tighter relations with Ankara to make a stronger impact on the Turkish policies in refugee, human rights and Kurdish issues.

Over the past, the war and crises in and around Syria have shown us that the European Union has the lowest political and diplomatic impact on events in the region whereas, apart from the Syrians themselves and their neighbouring states, it bears the highest humanitarian and financial burden. Moscow, Tehran and Riyadh have, in particular, fuelled the civil war and the conflict yet hardly have to deal with the refugee issue. The EU counters this behaviour with dialogue and negotiations, it hopes for reason and good will on the part of the war parties and those fuelling the conflict. This approach could be invested with more authority, if the EU indeed seriously realised its common foreign, peace, development and security policy, speak and present itself with one voice and share the manifold tasks and challenges among all 28 member states.

**CONTACT**

Christian-Peter Hanelt, Middle East Expert

Tel.: +49 – 5241 81 81 187

[christian.hanelt@bertelsmann-stiftung.de](mailto:christian.hanelt@bertelsmann-stiftung.de)

Tim Lewis Poppenborg

[tim.lewis.poppenborg@bertelsmann-stiftung.de](mailto:tim.lewis.poppenborg@bertelsmann-stiftung.de)

Tel.: +49 – 5241 81 81 143

**FURTHER READING**

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