



Myanmar protesters gather after general strike call

## Brutal murders in rural Venezuela highlight violence against women

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ALEPPO, Syria: In this file photo taken on June 3, 2014, a man carries a young girl who was injured in a reported barrel-bomb attack by government forces in Kallaseh district in the northern city of Aleppo. —AFP

# 10 years on, no peace after war in Syria

## The fighting has tapered off, but the suffering hasn't

**BEIRUT:** After a decade of unfathomable violence and human tragedy that has made Syria the defining war of the early 21st century, the fighting has tapered off but the suffering hasn't. In 2011, Bashar al-Assad and his government briefly looked like another domino about to fall in the whirlwind of pro-democracy revolts sweeping the Middle East.

Ten years later, Assad is still there, a pyrrhic victor offering no credible prospects of reconciliation for the Syrian people and exercising limited sovereignty over a land left prey to foreign powers. In late January 2011, the uprisings that toppled dictators in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya became known as the "Arab Spring" and the contagious nature of the region's revolts became obvious.

It took time for the wave of protests to take hold in Syria, where demonstrations had been banned for half a century and the government seemed more entrenched than anywhere else in the region. Some of the first gatherings, such as vigils outside the Libyan embassy, were ostensibly in support of the other uprisings and not a direct challenge to the four-decade-old rule of the Assad clan.

"We would call for freedom and democracy in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, but we were actually chanting for Syria," prominent Syrian activist Mazen Darwish recalled.

"We became obsessed with finding the spark that would put us next in line," he says, retracing the beginnings of Syria's

revolt in a phone interview with AFP. "Who was going to be Syria's Bouazizi?" The closest equivalent to Mohamed Bouazizi, the young street vendor whose self-immolation was the trigger for Tunisia's revolt, turned out to be youngsters who spray-painted the words "Your turn, doctor" on a wall in the southern town of Daraa.

The slogan was a clear reference to Assad, wishing the London-trained ophthalmologist the same fate as Tunisia's Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, who had to flee into exile—or perhaps even Libya's Muammar Gaddafi who was later that year lynched by a frenzied mob. The graffiti led to arrests and torture, which in turn caused an uproar that rallied a critical number of Syrians behind the protests.

March 15, the date which AFP and many others use for the start of the Syrian uprising, was not the first day of protests but the day that demonstrations happened nationwide and simultaneously. Journalist and author Rania Abouzeid describes the moment that gives its title to her book on the Syrian war: "No Turning Back". "The great wall of fear had cracked, the silence was shattered. The confrontation was existential—for all sides—from its inception," she wrote.

### Exodus

What came next led to the planet's worst conflict in a generation. The displacement, which saw half of Syria's pre-war

population of 22 million forced to flee their homes, was the largest induced by conflict since World War II. Half of those displaced fled the country, some of them swelling a wave of refugees reaching the shores of Europe, a phenomenon whose scope affected public opinion, politics and the outcome of elections on the continent.

In the chaos that followed the eruption of civil conflict in Syria, the most violent group in modern jihad—the so-called Islamic State—proclaimed a "caliphate" straddling Syria and Iraq that reshaped global terrorism. Arch foes Iran and the United States both sent troops to Syria to protect their interests, as did Turkey. Russia for its part launched in 2015 its largest military intervention since the collapse of the Soviet Union, a move that turned the tide in Assad's favor.

Almost 400,000 people were killed in 10 years, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a UK-based war monitor that has continued to keep count after international organizations gave up. Most of the 117,000 civilians in that grim tally were killed by the government, whose willingness to turn against the population surprised even its fiercest opponents. "I didn't think it would reach this level of violence," said Darwish. "But I was mistaken."

The government has used chemical weapons on civilian areas to subdue pockets of resistance, it has raided densely inhabited areas with crude barrel bombs that sow indiscrimi-

nate death, and systematically resorted to siege and starvation tactics.

### War spiral

Countless strikes were carried out against medical facilities in defiance of global outrage. Huge swathes of Aleppo, once the country's economic hub and a heritage jewel considered one of the world's longest continuously inhabited cities, were leveled. The rapid militarization of the government's response to the initial protests and the emergence of jihadist groups—helped by the government's mass release of Al-Qaeda militants—turned the Syrian uprising into the Syrian war. The ultra-violence that the Islamic State group projected and its ability to attract fighters from Europe and beyond instilled a fear in the West that wiped out the early pro-democracy enthusiasm.

The world's focus shifted to the fight against jihadists and away from the Syrian people's struggle against Assad, who quickly recast himself as the best rampart against terrorism.

"We were very naive when we started the revolution," said Darwish, who was among those who created the first coordination committees organizing the anti-government movement. "Our outlook was sentimental, poetic, romantic. We thought our moral high ground alone would be enough. We had no tools when the others—the regime and the Islamists—had real partners and huge resources," he explained. —AFP

## With heavy hearts, Syrians in Turkey pursue new lives

**GAZIANTEP, Turkey:** Some are coping, others struggling, but Syrian refugees in Turkey say they dare not follow their dreams and return home while President Bashar al-Assad remains in power.

Of the 5.6 million people who have fled Syria's conflict, more than 3.6 million have settled in neighboring Turkey. Their arrival since Syria's descent into bloody war that began a decade ago has profoundly changed the makeup of southern Turkish border provinces such as Gaziantep and Hatay.

According to official figures, Gaziantep is now home to 450,000 Syrians, making up a fifth of its population. Most have come from Aleppo, the obliterated Syrian city just an hour's drive south.

"I want to return to Syria and am trying to get Turkish citizenship at the same time, because as long as Assad is in power, our return is out of the question," Ismail Abtini, 42, says. He runs a grill restaurant with his family on one of the main thoroughfares in the city of Gaziantep, after fleeing Aleppo in 2013 with his parents, siblings, wife and children to "avoid the barrel bombs dropping on our neighborhood". One of his brothers was killed in the government assault.

### Lives left behind

Abtini acknowledges that his business is booming, as two roasters rotate whole chickens and a spit is laden with

meat for takeaway shawarma. But, he adds, back home, "we left behind businesses, houses and large farms"—something to return to should Assad ever be ousted.

On this stretch of Gaziantep's Inonu Avenue, better known as the Iranian Bazaar, most of the shops are run by Syrians—although storefront signs are spelled out in Turkish, as required by law.

"We fled the Assad regime, and if someone suddenly told us that Assad has fallen, you wouldn't find a single Syrian in Turkey," says Zakaria al-Sabbagh, a 23-year-old dried fruit vendor.

"But if the regime stays put, there is no hope" of going back, adds fellow trader Khader al-Houssein, 41. "I love my children too much to put them through what I went through."

In a small barbershop, Mohammad Abu Al-Nar, 28, and his customers debate Syria's fate and their possible futures. "If I return now, I will be jailed and no one will hear from me again," the barber says, as he takes his scissors to a Syrian customer's mop of hair.

"Especially since I am an army deserter. And there are many others like me in Turkey."

### 'A beautiful country'

While the traders on Inonu Avenue are cobbling together new lives, others are only just hanging on. Zeina Alawi, who lost her husband in a bombing in 2014, lives with her four daughters and two sons in a squalid flat not far from the city center.

Deprived of odd jobs by the pandemic, she depends on good Samaritans to help feed her family and pay the equivalent of 50 euros (about \$60) a month for an apartment furnished with two mattresses, a striped sofa and a charcoal furnace. With no prospects of return in sight, she remembers Syria with fondness. "I tell the children that

accusations. A month later, during a visit to Iran, Johnson presses Tehran for her release.

On March 7, 2019, London accords diplomatic protection to Zaghari-Ratcliffe, saying her detention conditions do not comply with international law. In April, the Iranian authorities offer to free Zaghari-Ratcliffe if the United States drops accusations against an Iranian prisoner, also a woman, in Australia. London rejects the offer.

### Hunger strike, psychiatric ward

In June 2019, Zaghari-Ratcliffe launches a hunger strike that lasts two weeks. In July she is transferred to a hospital's psychiatric ward where she stays for several days. In October, little Gabriella returns to London so she can go to school under her father's care. Richard Ratcliffe, who has fought for years



GAZIANTEP, Turkey: A Syrian buys food in a grill shop in Gaziantep. Some are coping, others struggling, but the millions of Syrian refugees in Turkey say they dare not follow their dreams and return home while President Bashar Al-Assad remains in power. —AFP

Syria is a beautiful country where we lived in a house and were happy, where we didn't have to suffer the kind of work that we have to do here," Alawi says. "But God has decided otherwise."

### 'Maybe one day'

Ahd Al-Wali, a grocer and confidante of many of the neighborhood's Syrian families, grabbed her son and fled Aleppo in 2014, a year after her husband, an opposition fighter, was killed by regime forces.

"How could I go back there?" the 39-year-old asks in her small storefront, where she runs a tab for most of her poor Syrian customers. "Can you imagine walking down the street, seeing his (Assad's) portrait hanging amid all the destruction that he himself caused, not to mention the women and children he has killed?" she says. —AFP

### House arrest

In March 2020, because of the coronavirus pandemic, Zaghari-Ratcliffe is accorded temporary release and placed under house arrest at her parents' home. On September 8, a new charge is levied against her, for spreading propaganda against Tehran. She appears before a judge on November 2 and the trial is adjourned without a date set for resumption. Upon completion of her five-year sentence for sedition on Sunday, Zaghari-Ratcliffe's electronic bracelet is removed, but she is summoned to appear in court on March 14 over the propaganda charge. —AFP

## Jailed in Tehran: British-Iranian's judicial saga

**LONDON:** British-Iranian dual citizen Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who completed a five-year sentence for sedition in Iran on Sunday, has been on a judicial roller coaster since 2016.

Here are the key dates in her ordeal.

### Airport arrest

Zaghari-Ratcliffe, an employee of the Thomson Reuters Foundation, is arrested on April 3, 2016, with her daughter Gabriella, then 22-months-old, at the Tehran airport after she visited her family for the Iranian new

year. The toddler's British passport is confiscated and she is handed over to her maternal grandparents.

Incarcerated at the Evin prison in the Iranian capital, Zaghari-Ratcliffe, then 37, is accused in June 2016 of plotting a "soft overthrow" of the Iranian government with the support of foreign intelligence services.

### Jailed for five years

On September 9, 2016, Zaghari-Ratcliffe is sentenced to five years in jail for taking part in a "sedition movement" in Iran in 2009, according to an Iranian judicial official. The sentence is upheld on appeal in April 2017. In November that year, Boris Johnson, who was then Britain's foreign minister, commits a faux pas by telling a parliament committee that Zaghari-Ratcliffe trained journalists in Iran, a remark that fuels Tehran's

## Syria's Idlib: What future for the rebel holdout?

**BEIRUT:** Ten years into Syria's war, a large patch of territory in the country's northwest controlled by jihadists and allied rebels is still holding out against the Damascus regime.

Can the Idlib bastion, protected against a military onslaught since a March 2020 ceasefire, continue to survive as its own self-run territory, perhaps a bit like the Palestinian Gaza Strip?

### Who lives in Idlib?

On the border with Turkey, a former Al-Qaeda affiliate as well as a flurry of rebel groups and other jihadists resist government rule in a chunk of territory referred to as Idlib.

The jihadist-dominated bastion is made up of half of Idlib province as well as slivers of adjacent governorates. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) controls the agricultural area and its towns through its influence over the so-called Salvation Government.

Despite HTS claiming it has renounced all ties with Al-Qaeda, the United Nations and European Union consider the group to be "terrorist". Syria's last major opposition bastion is home to 2.9 million people, of whom two thirds have been displaced from their homes by conflict, the UN says.

Many of those displaced, including those forced to flee other parts of the country, live in camps.

For about a year, fighting has largely halted in and around the area after a ceasefire deal, brokered by Damascus ally Russia and rebel backer Turkey, took hold in March 2020. But years of successive Russia-backed government bombardment campaigns have chipped away at the opposition stronghold.

From September 2017 to today, jihadists and allied rebels saw their bastion shrink from 9,000 to just 3,000 square kilometers (3,470 to 1,150 square miles), geographer Fabrice Balanche says.

### How many are jihadists?

Of the 2.9 million residents, several thousand are said to be jihadist fighters, according to UN estimates. The region is run by HTS and its 10,000 mostly Syrian fighters, a UN report released last month said.

They control the importation and distribution of gasoline and diesel, pocketing about \$1 million a month in trading fuel and energy, it said. The group is also reported to control distribution of humanitarian aid, "and confiscates portions of these goods to reinforce HTS patronage networks," the report added. But several other jihadist groups also exist, and there is sometimes infighting. —AFP