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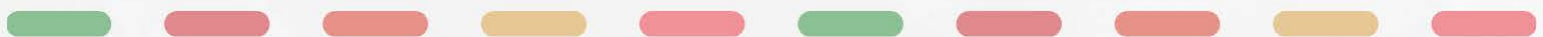


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Arab NGO Network for Development  
شبكة المنظمات العربية غير الحكومية للتنمية

A Critical Reading of the Syrian Government's Report  
"The Second Voluntary National Review on the Sustainable Development Goals 2023"  
**Detachment from Reality and Ignoring the Conflict  
Foundations**



December 2023



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## 1. Introduction

The UN Member States adopted the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and since then, these states have been assessing and reviewing their achievements by engaging stakeholders, including government agencies, civil society organizations, academia, and the private sector. The Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports summarise the country's efforts, policies, and initiatives aligned with the SDGs and highlight accomplishments, challenges faced, best practices, and lessons learned. They often include data, studies, and examples of projects or policies implemented to advance the achievement of sustainable development goals.

The Syrian Government submitted its first Voluntary National Review reports (VNR) on SDGs in 2020 and participated in the presentation at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF).<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the civil society contributed a “Shadow” report in response to the Government’s report at that time. Similarly, in 2023, the Syrian Government completed its second Voluntary Report, publishing it along with its messages on the United Nations website. However, it withdrew its participation in the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) for 2023.

The Syrian Center for Policy Research, in collaboration with the Arab NGO Network for Development and Several Syrian civil societies (organizations and individuals), prepared an independent alternative report on the extent to which SDGs have been achieved in Syria amid the ongoing conflict. Based on this, a Development Policy Forum on SDGs (two sessions) was held to discuss the Key points of the Government’s 2023 report and the topics that should be emphasised in the alternative report. Accordingly, this report was prepared to provide an overview of the development situation in Syria.

On the following pages, the report provides a summary of the Syrian Government’s report and highlights the methodological discrepancies within it. Additionally, it offers an analytical brief of Syria’s development performance in light of the conflict for the year 2023.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations. (2020). [UN-High-Level Political Forum \(HLPF\)-Syrian Arab Republic- Voluntary National Review 2020.](#)

## 2. The Government Report

### 2.1 A Summary of the Government Report<sup>2</sup>

#### 2.1.1 Methodology

According to the Government review, the first national Sustainable Development Report was marked as a baseline in shaping the initial and second government reviews in 2020 and 2023. Since that date, the "National Committee" responsible for monitoring Sustainable Development Goals has continued to assess changes in the sustainable development objectives and purposes through various indicators. According to the Syrian government, the report was prepared by committees involving government institutions, civil society representatives, academics, and the private sector in collaboration with UN agencies and international and regional organisations.

#### 2.1.2 Key Findings

The government review described a set of indicators regarding the performance of Sustainable Development Goals in Syria, linking each indicator to one of the 17 goals, categorised into three main groups: 1) Goals achievable by 2030, including SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 4 (Quality Education). 2) Goals with some of their objectives achievable by 2030, including SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation). 3) Goals not achievable by 2030, which encompass the remaining SDGs.

The following are the most significant indicators outlined in the government review:

##### **1) Indicators for Goals achievable by 2030:**

The government review indicates the potential achievement of the third SDG (Good Health and Well-being) and the fourth SDG (Quality Education) by 2030. According to the review, there has been an increase in the maternal mortality rate across Syria, rising from 52 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2010 to 60.4 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2022. The infant mortality rate also increased from 17.9 per thousand in 2010 to 18.3 per thousand in 2021. The percentage of children under five years old immunised against vaccine-preventable diseases decreased from 99 per cent in 2010 to 70 per cent in 2021. Additionally, the net enrolment rate in primary education reached approximately 68 per cent in 2022, compared to around 97 per cent in 2010. The primary education completion rate has declined from 100 per cent in 2010 to 78 per cent in 2021. The male illiteracy rate decreased from 8.6 per cent in 2010 to 3.29 per cent in 2021, while the female illiteracy rate decreased from 22.6 per cent in 2010 to 8.66 per cent in 2021.

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<sup>2</sup> This paragraph discusses the key findings presented in the "Second Voluntary National Review on the Sustainable Development Goals 2023," released by the Syrian government as is. Our shadow report does not endorse these findings.

## 2) Indicators for Goals with some of their objectives achievable by 2030:

The government review indicated the potential achievement of some targets within SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation).

As per the government's review, food insecurity in Syria has intensified during the conflict years. The proportion of households vulnerable to food insecurity surged to 40.4 per cent of the total households in 2022, with the average percentage of moderately food-insecure households reaching 46.3 per cent. Only about 13 per cent of households were classified as food-secure. Additionally, the share of land allocated for sustainable and productive agriculture in Syria decreased from 5.53 per cent in 2010 to 4.68 per cent in 2021. The government review also noted that the annual inflation rate for food prices reached 44 per cent from 2010 to 2021.

Furthermore, the percentage of treated domestic and industrial wastewater in urban areas declined from 50 per cent in 2010 to 41 per cent in 2022. Similarly, for industrial water, this percentage decreased from 79 per cent in 2010 to 50 in 2022. Water stress increased from 100 per cent in 2010 to approximately 109 per cent in 2022.

Regarding gender equality, the percentage of women's political participation remained nearly constant from 2010 to 2022, with women's representation in parliament hovering around 12 per cent. The share of women in administrative positions in the government sector remained stable at around 42 per cent during the same period. Meanwhile, the share of seats held by women in local governments increased from 2.6 per cent in 2010 to 12.5 per cent in 2022. However, the percentage of early and forced marriages among females increased, and cases of human trafficking, assault, and sexual exploitation rose from 331 cases in 2010 to 826 cases in 2022.

## 3) Indicators for Goals unachievable by 2030:

The government review highlights the inability to achieve 12 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Here is an overview of key indicators associated with these goals as outlined in the review:

- **Economic Growth, Decent Employment, and Funding:** The average annual GDP growth rate was (-6.8) per cent during the period (2010 – 2021). The overall unemployment rate increased from 8.6 per cent in 2010 to 48.3 per cent in 2015, then decreased to around 21.85 per cent in 2021. Child labour (ages 5–17) was 6.88 per cent in 2021.

Total government revenue as a percentage of GDP decreased from 22 per cent in 2010 to 13 per cent in 2021. Tax revenue as a percentage of GDP decreased from 10 per cent in 2010 to 7 per cent in 2021. The percentage of the budget funded by actual revenue decreased from 91 per cent in 2010 to around 45 per cent in 2021. The proportion of the overall state budget funded by local taxes decreased from around 42 per cent to approximately 24 per cent in 2021. Foreign direct investment as a percentage of GDP declined from 2 per cent in 2010 to 0 per cent in 2020 and 2021.

- **Infrastructure, Cities, and Sustainable Communities:** The percentage of local demand from the total electricity demand decreased from 99 per cent in 2010 to 32 in 2022. The total number of transported passengers (by land and air) decreased from 8.6 million in 2010 to 1.4 million in 2022. The total transported goods decreased from 48.5 million tons in 2010 to 7.1 million tons in 2022. The percentage of people living in poor neighbourhoods or informal settlements decreased from 15 per cent in 2010 to 11 in the period (2019–2021). The population percentage with adequate public transportation decreased from 27.3 per cent in 2010 to 25.6 per cent in 2022.
- **Poverty and Inequality:** The extreme poverty rate increased from 8.5 per cent of the total population in 2010 to 55 in 2021. Public spending on education and health as a percentage of total public spending decreased from 22.8 per cent in 2010 to 14 per cent in 2022. The labour share in real GDP at production factor cost declined from 30 per cent in 2010 to 14.9 in 2021.
- **Environmental Indicators:** The area of degraded land increased to about 23.8 per cent of the total land area in 2019, compared to around 12 per cent in 2015. The forest area as a percentage of the total land area did not exceed 2.9 per cent during the period of (2019-2022). The red list index for threatened species of plants and animals increased from 60 species in 2010 to 369 in 2022.
- **Security and Institutions Indicators:** Intentional homicide increased from 213 cases in 2010 to 443 cases in 2022, peaking in 2013 (3096 cases). Injury cases resulting from physical violations increased from 164 in 2010 to 189 in 2022. The number of human trafficking victims increased from 116 cases in 2010 to 451 in 2022. Cases of sexual assault on youth under the age of 18 increased from 16 cases in 2010 to 39 in 2022. The number of individuals benefiting from official or unofficial mechanisms to regularise their status was (201056) in 2012 and (101578) in 2022, compared to 1446 individuals in 2010.



### **2.1.3 Main Challenges**

The Government review attributed the inability to achieve most of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 to several factors, including the sanctions imposed on Syria by the European Union and the United States targeting the stability of the Syrian economy and the effectiveness of its institutions. It also pointed to the continuation of some countries' illegitimate policies based on aggression, support for terrorism, and investment in it to serve their interests, as well as their occupation of parts of northern, northeastern, and northwestern Syria, looting its resources. The ongoing Israeli occupation of the Syrian Golan Heights and its repeated attacks on Syrian territories were highlighted as threats to the region's stability. The review emphasised the challenges posed by areas outside the control of the government, hindering development and blocking humanitarian aid access. Additionally, it mentioned the theft of Syrian energy resources by the unauthorised USA forces on Syrian territory and their allied militias, impacting national capabilities and hindering their use in environmental protection and sustainable development.

On another note, the government review highlighted economic and funding challenges that hindered the achievement of sustainable development goals. These challenges included a reduction in official international development assistance to Syria, mainly limited to emergency humanitarian aid lacking sustainability, Syria being denied access to its frozen funds abroad due to sanctions, and the decline in productive economic activity because a significant number of facilities and infrastructure are outside the economic cycle. Additionally, there's a shortage of financial resources for housing, reconstruction, and the rehabilitation of agricultural, industrial, and service sectors. The review also highlighted significant fluctuations in the exchange rate resulting from a decline in foreign exchange sources in the economy, alongside a deficiency in traditional energy sources that support economic growth and weaknesses in other energy systems.

The review also addressed environmental challenges, such as the increasing severity of climate change and natural disasters, which negatively affected the agriculture sector, vegetation cover, and the lack of financial capabilities required for adapting to climate change.

### **2.1.4 Key Requirements**

Supporting Syria to achieving its SDGs, the government review called for an immediate lift of sanctions imposed on Syria, ending the occupation in all its forms, establishing the authority of the state over its entire territory, combating terrorism, stopping the looting and diminution of national resources and wealth, lifting the suspension of Syria's membership in some international organisations, and providing international support for development plans in Syria through sufficient and unconditional funding. Additionally, there is a need to support Syria's participation in global economic and financial institutions fairly and justly and activate the role of international institutions in supporting the national priorities of member states. Facilitating the emergency financing provision and the support by the International economic and financial institutions for member countries facing natural disasters without delay or politicisation was also emphasised.

## **2.2 A critical reading of the government review**

The use of the Sustainable Development Goals methodology to measure and diagnose conflict-related deterioration is a limited tool due to the focus of this methodology on quantitative indicators without diagnosing the dynamics and policies that enable or hinder achieving the goals. It also restricts many structural aspects in the analysis, such as political oppression, systematic use of violence, power relationships, and regional and international exploitation. In addition, it overlooks social and cultural aspects such as values and social networks. Furthermore, it lacks mechanisms that enforce the mandatory implementation and accountability of governments and pivotal actors.

The government review came considerably disconnected from reality. It assumes it will achieve health and education goals by 2030 in terms of development outcomes, focusing on some developmental disparities and overlooking the country's collapse in various areas due to the ongoing conflict. The political power is fragmented among four areas of control (the Syrian government, Autonomous Administration, interim government, and salvation government) with the absence of the rule of law, the loss of sovereignty and stability, in addition to the dominance of military and security forces, the absence of security and protection for citizens, the deprivation of basic public services, and the waste of resources, which constitutes a typical case of state failure. Various regional and international powers (Russia, the United States, Iran, Turkey, and others) dominate political and military authorities, public institutions, and economic resources across different regions.

During the conflict, human development indicators witnessed a decline, with hundreds of thousands of casualties among both military personnel and civilians. Millions were left wounded or disabled, and around half of the population became displaced or refugees. Many influential actors endured years of siege, arbitrary detention, torture, and forced disappearance. Women, in particular, experienced widespread violence, displacement, and exclusion. Infrastructure, involving homes, schools, hospitals, power stations, and more, suffered extensive destruction, often accompanied by looting and the confiscation of public and private property.

Public health indicators collapsed in terms of mortality and morbidity rates, including infectious and non-communicable diseases. Approximately half of the children lost educational opportunities due to a lack of access and a decline in the quality of education. Conflict economies prevailed with a decline in productive economies, leading to smuggling, looting, royalties, monopolies, and human and drug trafficking. The economy revolved around militarization, humanitarian aid, and increased disparities among Syrians, contributing to heightened levels of extreme poverty and food insecurity.

On the social front, the role of civil society expanded through initiatives rooted in solidarity, yet social relationships and shared values experienced profound divisions due to the conflict. This division was exacerbated by the spread of hate speech, hostility, and extremism.

Environmentally, natural resources endured extensive destruction, widespread pollution, and severe damage to biodiversity.

As for the actors and political, social, and economic systems and their functions and roles in the conflict, the government review noticeably overlooks the dimensions of the conflict and the roles of the Syrian government, non-state actors, and civil forces. It attributes the causes of the collapse to external factors related to sanctions or opposing external forces.

The political power in Syria has transformed the state into an instrument of oppression, intimidation, and the violation of fundamental rights, including the right to life, protection, and dignified living. In 2011, the Syrian government adopted a policy of military violence to suppress peaceful protests demanding freedom and political change, banning any potential for a political resolution and persisting in imposing authority through force. The army, security forces, and militias have been deployed to perpetrate killings, injuries, torture, and forced disappearance of Syrians across various regions. Policies of collective punishment have been used, such as sieges, cutting off access to food and services, or bombing and the destruction of cities and villages, resulting in unprecedented human rights violations.

The authority leveraged public institutions in favour of political power, including the army and public service providers like health and education institutions, resulting in systematic discrimination in accessing these services, with public resources being diverted to support military operations and the conflict elite.

Furthermore, the government adopted policies that exacerbated social divisions based on identity or regional affiliations, led to the deterioration of social cohesion and shared values.

The authority strengthened the foundations of the conflict economy by allowing conflict elites to exploit opportunities and economic resources. In addition, the authority implemented policies of looting, extortion, smuggling, and offering incentives for engagement in the military field, including armed militias. Additionally, the government gave up a portion of its sovereignty and economic resources to foreign forces supporting it in the brutal conflict, particularly Russia and Iran. Based on this, the government report overlooks the crucial role of the Syrian government in initiating and fuelling the conflict, as well as fails to analyse the policies and strategies of non-state actors, which, in turn, committed violations and adopted specific strategies after the shift to military conflict. These strategies primarily targeted civilians and infrastructure, building power around military strength and external support, and contributed to dismantling social relationships, adopting conflict economies, and heavy dependency on aid.

The report lacks a political proposal for increased governance participation, reform in the roles of security and military entities, and the accountability of human rights violators and criminals. It also disregards the progress of the political process and resolutions from the Security Council, including Resolution 2254 (2015) on political settlement, Resolution 1325 (2000) addressing women, peace, and security, and Resolution 2250 (2015) focusing on youth, peace, and security.

From a technical perspective, the Syrian government's review presents misleading developmental evidence, as most of it does not cover the entire geographical area of Syria. It relies on statistics with significant flaws in survey design and implementation, resulting in, for example, declining literacy levels or child mortality rates returning to pre-conflict levels. Additionally, it adopts misleading indicators, such as the intentional killing index, which

overlooks systematic killings by authorities outside the legal framework, attributed to a decline in data comprehensiveness for all of Syria and the deterioration of the function of official statistics during the conflict period, as well as intentional neglect or distortion of some indicators and evidence.

The continuation of current policies confirms the impossibility of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, on the one hand, and reinforces conditions for conflict and collapse, leading to a reverse development direction, on the other hand.

In the following, we present an alternative analysis of the performance of some SDGs in the year 2023:



## 3. A Reading Of Syria's Development Performance in Light of the Conflict

### 3.1 Political and International Relations

(linked to goal 16)

#### 3.1.1 Tyranny and Political Fragmentation

In 2011, the social movement represented an uprising against political authoritarianism, an incarnation of the “institutional bottleneck”, governance failure, inequality, and marginalisation. The political regime responded with a military-security strategy to suppress the social movement, employing armed violence, collective punishment, and identities, resulting in an unprecedented state of political tyranny, injustice, and severe violations of rights and freedoms. The involvement of regional and international powers played a central role in militarizing the movement, exacerbating societal divisions, and fostering dependency on external powers. The military and security forces successfully eroded social capital, leading to profound divisions within Syrian society.

The prolonged impact of continuous violations over 12 years has created catastrophic human rights conditions in Syria. Despite a reduction in the intensity of some violations in 2022, many patterns of abuse persist, including killings, arbitrary arrests, forced disappearances, displacement, torture, looting of land and property, and security chaos. These violations threaten human rights and dignity, with no prospect to stop or hold those involved accountable.

Hundreds of Syrians are trying to flee their homeland, sell their properties, and seek asylum worldwide. The Syrian Network for Human Rights has documented significant human rights violations by conflict parties and controlling forces in Syria since 2011, including the killing of 230,224 civilians, including 22,998 children and 11,981 adult females, along with 15,272 victims of torture and 154,817 cases of arbitrary detention/imprisonment, in addition to approximately 14 million forcibly displaced individuals.<sup>3</sup> Despite the relative calm in the conflict in recent years, violence-related civilian deaths reached 2,328 in 2021 and 2022, with 237 victims of torture and 4,439 cases of detention.<sup>4</sup>

Freedom of expression and transparency collapsed, making Syria one of the most perilous countries globally. Expressing opinions came at the cost of lives, with the expression and accountability index reaching 0.97 in 2021, one of the world's lowest values on a scale of 1 to 10. Grand corruption evolved into organised plunder of public and private wealth, reflected in a corruption control index of 0.48 according to global governance indicators (World Bank, 2022).<sup>5</sup>

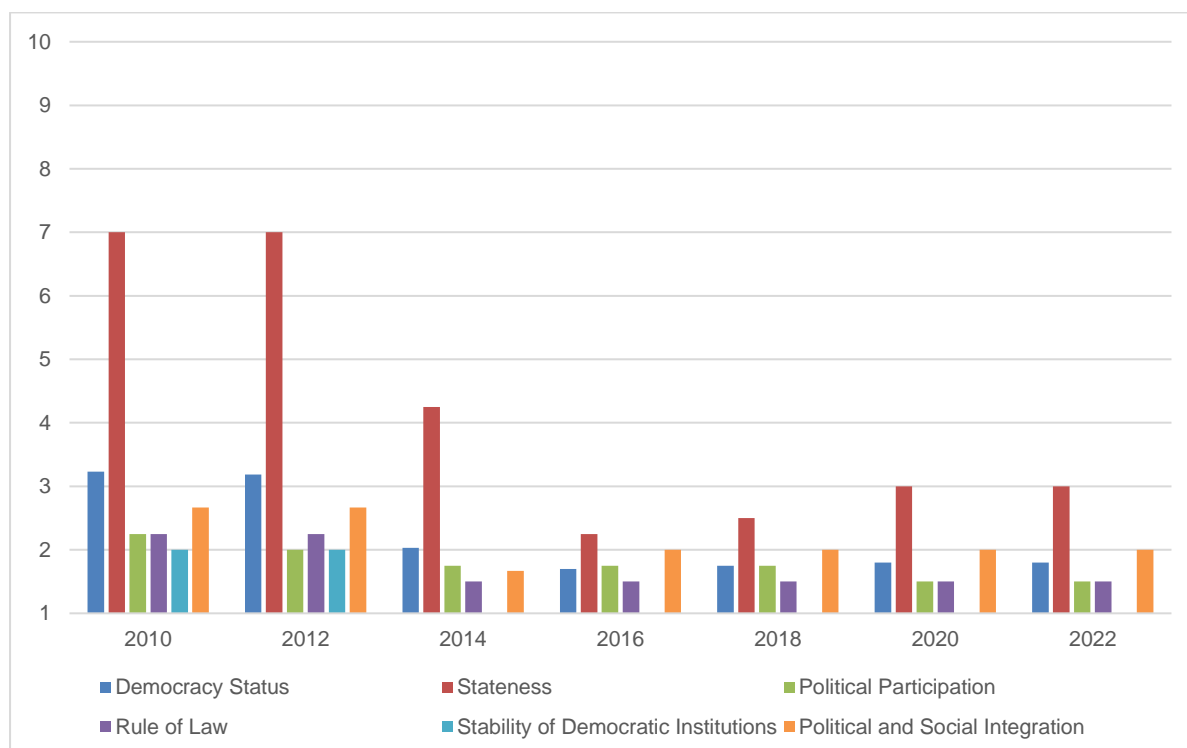
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<sup>3</sup> The Syrian Network for Human Rights. (2023). [A Democratic Political Transition is the Principal Demand of the 12-Year Popular Uprising.](#)

<sup>4</sup> The Syrian Network for Human Rights. (2023). [SNHR's 12th Annual Report: Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in 2022.](#)

<sup>5</sup> The World Bank. (2022). [Global Governance Indicators.](#)

**Figure (1): The democracy status and its sub-indexes during the period 2010-2022 (Bertelsmann Guide)**



Source: [Institution Bertelsmann Transformation Index \(BTI\) 2022](#).

Syria currently suffers from political fragmentation, lacking a central government capable of managing the country. New military and political powers have emerged and imposed themselves as de facto authorities (see Table 1), with external, international, and regional powers exerting dominance over decision-making in all ruling power institutions. Security forces and sectarian parties have infiltrated these institutions, negatively impacting the state of democracy indicator and its components (Bertelsmann, 2022),<sup>6</sup> which was reflected in the decline of political and social integration and political participation indicators, in addition to the social contract's degradation and the collapse of the state entity (Figure 1). The historical tyranny and political repression, combined with the current reality of fragmentation and identity politics, have dismantled spaces necessary for citizens to build social consensus around a national vision that will lead the country towards a better reality. Consequently, political stability in the whole land has faltered despite a reduction in the intensity of military operations.

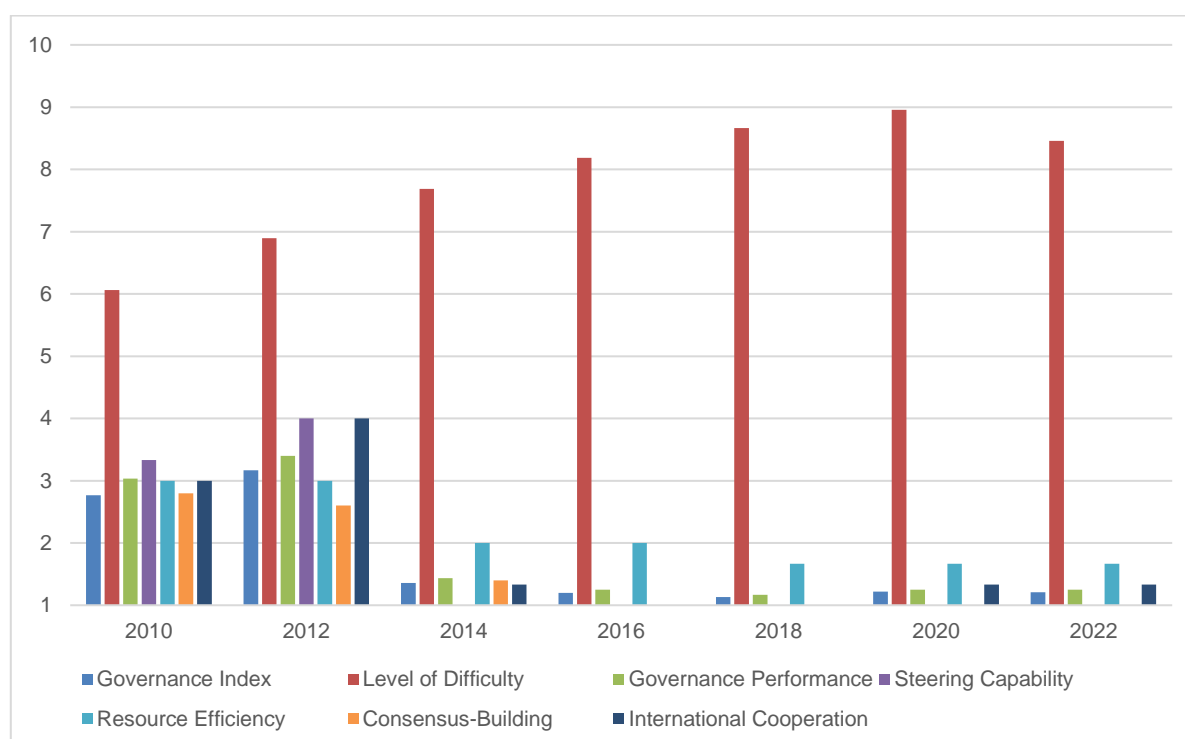
<sup>6</sup> The index value ranges between 1 (the minimum value) and 10 (the maximum value).

**Table (1): Areas of control over Syrian geography by region from March 2020 to December 2023**

control party	Control area
Syrian government	The governorates of Damascus, Rural Damascus, Dara'a, Quneitra, As-Sweida, Homs, Hama, Lattakia, Tartous, part of Al-Hasakeh, part of Deir-Ezzor, and part of Aleppo.
The Interim Government and the Salvation Government	Idlib, northern Aleppo, Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn in Ar-Raqqa and Al-Hasakeh.
The Autonomous Administration	Large parts of Al-Hasakeh, Ar-Raqqa, Deir-Ezzor, and part of Aleppo Governorate.

Source: Syrian Center for Policy Research 2023.

Political fragmentation and tyranny have manifested in public institutions becoming tools for collective punishment, plunder, and the imposition of hegemony at the expense of citizens. Human and material resources deteriorated, corruption and favouritism became more widespread than they were before the movement, and systematic discrimination based on political, ideological, national, and sectarian affiliations proliferated. Economic and social divisions deepened, while privileges were granted to those close to the authorities. The democratic and development project was absent from the literature and practices of controlling powers, leaving behind dangerous legacies, such as political systems monopolising power through force, violence, and external support, leading to the squandering of human, social, cultural, and material resources.

**Figure (2): Governance Index and Its Components during the Period 2010-2022 (Bertelsmann Guide)**

Source: [Institution Bertelsmann Transformation Index \(BTI\) 2022](#).

The Governance Index and its indicators (Bertelsmann, 2022)<sup>7</sup> illustrate the disappearance of national consensus, the absence of agreement on general goals, the inability of the existing institutions in conflict management and finding solutions, and the restricted space for civil society participation, which places Syria among the lowest positions in the index compared to countries worldwide (see Figure 2).

### 3.1.2 The Structure of Dominant Forces: External Hegemony and Dependency

The official political authority in Syria has transformed into a force of oppression and destruction, and it has played an enormous role in initiating and fuelling the conflict, squandering developmental resources, and committing unprecedented violations. The regime diverted national resources to support the strategy of militarizing the conflict and subjugating the population, exploiting the local and later external capacities for the detriment of development and the violation of rights. The regime was responsible for the killing and injuring of hundreds of thousands, engaging in torture, abduction, and politicization of identity based on regional, political affiliation, and cultural background. It implemented policies of siege, impoverishment, forced displacement, and grave violations against women and children.<sup>8</sup> Despite this, the United Nations still considers the Syrian regime a representative of the country in international forums, relies on its reports, and publishes them on its official website, as was the case with the regime's Voluntary National Review Reports (VNR) 2020.

The controlling powers have continued to consolidate the foundations of conflict economies in recent years despite the decline in direct military operations, achieved by distorting public institutions and diverting human and material resources in favour of conflict elites, and is evident in the absence of the rule of law, the domination of military and security forces over the majority of resources, and the adoption of policies of destruction, looting, seizing opportunities, expanding illegitimate economic activities, and exploiting humanitarian aid, these conflict-centric policies have taken place within an economy that has suffered from the systematic destruction of material resources and natural assets during the years of war, accompanied by unprecedented losses of human capital through killing, torture, displacement, siege, exploitation, discrimination, and working in inhumane conditions. Conflict forces sought to transform the economy into a tool for dominance, societal subjugation, and sustaining the conflict. The distortion of the economic system contributed to shifting the burdens of the war onto citizens and small investors, providing available opportunities to conflict elites and dominating foreign powers, solidifying untrustiness between society and public institutions. Organic relationships deepened between political actors and the new market's elite, turning the surviving wealth from destruction to their interests through an unprecedented, forced redistribution of the tangible and intangible capital, which created a disparity between political actors and the new elite, on one hand, and the medium and small private sector, workers, unemployed individuals, displaced people, and the poor, on the other hand.

Figure (3) illustrates the mechanisms that constitute the conflict economy through three main factors: Firstly, the failure of military and political institutions to reach a political solution or break in war; secondly, the external factor represented by the imposition of economic

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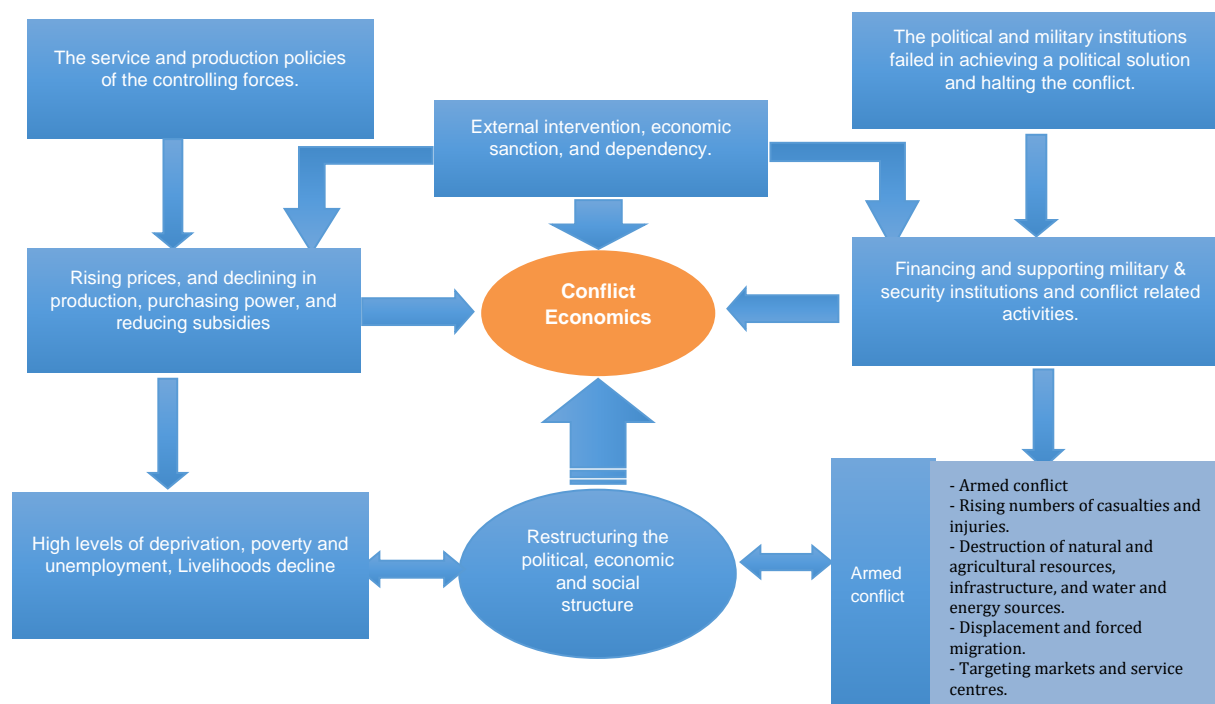
<sup>7</sup> The index value ranges between 1 (the minimum value) and 10 (the maximum value).

<sup>8</sup> Syrian Center for Policy Research. (2022). [Identity Politics in Syria: A Background Paper](#).



sanctions, the dependency of conflicting parties, and conflict financing, which contributed to the escalation of violence, destruction, and the violence-associated economy. Lastly, the formal and informal policies adopted by controlling parties in their areas of influence contributed to the deterioration of living conditions and the increase in levels of poverty and deprivation, which led to the restructuring of economic, social, and political structures to serve the conflict economies.

**Figure (3): Mechanisms shaping the conflict economy**



Source: Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR).

Syria has become a field for regional and international conflicts, with the involvement of Russia, Iran, the United States, Turkey, and other regional states, each region having a different form of governance and varying degrees of international and regional actors with various levels of effectiveness and influence (Table 2). Foreign powers have taken control of or contributed to the distortion or destruction of institutions associated with the economy. The manifestations of foreign control in Syria are evident through their military bases and control points scattered across Syrian territories, as well as their influence over existing administrative institutions and border crossings.

The methods of controlling resources vary among different actors. For example, Russia has secured significant investment opportunities in Syrian government-controlled areas through long-term contracts, such as the Tartus port, gas production projects in the Homs countryside, phosphate mines in the Palmyra countryside, and Syria's sole fertilizer complex. Russia has also been granted exclusive rights for oil exploration in the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of Tartus. Iran has gained control over various residential, investment, and industrial projects. In 2019, Syria and Iran signed 11 agreements, memorandums of understanding, and executive programs covering economic, scientific, cultural, infrastructure, services, investment, and housing sectors.

The United States of America controls the oil fields in northern and eastern Syria, while Turkish companies dominate the electricity sector and the telecommunications and postal sectors in northwestern Syria. Additionally, they invest in the construction of residential suburbs in the region.

**Table (2): The main actors in the Syrian conflict**

	<b>The actors</b>
<b>Regionally / internationally</b>	The United States, Russia, Turkey, Iran, the Gulf states, Britain, the European Union, the international coalition, the United Nations
<b>Nationally</b>	The Syrian government, the Autonomous Administration, the Interim Government, and the Salvation Government
<b>locally</b>	Local councils, militias and non-state military forces, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, crime networks and warlords, civil society and NGOs.

Source: Syrian Center for Policy Research. (2020). [Conflict Economies in Syria: Roots, Dynamics, and Pathways for Change](#).

Simultaneously, International organizations and external, regional, and international actors that work in the humanitarian field have continued to play a significant role in mitigating the worsening humanitarian situation for Syrians. Syria has received over USD 40 billion in humanitarian aid during the conflict period<sup>9</sup>. Humanitarian response in Syria faced two fundamental issues: first, complications related to the allocation and coordination of funding, and second, the issue of politicizing the response, which had a substantial impact on neutrality and sustainability. Overall, humanitarian agencies have played a crucial role in meeting the growing demands for supporting the livelihoods of Syrians, displaced persons, refugees, and host communities. Additionally, international organizations have operated under the pressure of high demand and deteriorating security, managing to be present in hard-to-reach areas. However, these interventions have not succeeded in bridging the gaps between needs and resources, facing polarization and discrimination, weak coordination, accountability issues, and the dominance of violence-based institutions. The heavy reliance of many Syrian families on humanitarian aid as a significant source of income has contributed to perpetuating a state of dependency.

On the other hand, the sanctions imposed on various sectors have harmed the economy in different ways. Production and trade have declined, and the production cost has increased due to rising energy costs, transportation, and financial transactions, which increase living costs, poverty, and unemployment. Different levels of sanctions are present in the Syrian geography:

1. Turkish sanctions in the northeast acted as unilateral measures, affecting food security and livelihoods for Syrians in northeastern Syria and nationally, for example, restricting the flow of water across the Euphrates River or water pumping stations and violating international water agreements. Sanctions on Idleb and the Salvation Government under counter-terrorism laws have impacted the population and civil organizations operating in the region.

<sup>9</sup>Syrian Center for Policy Research. (2020). [Justice to Transcend Conflict](#).

2. Sanctions on the Syrian government, such as the Caesar Act and others, have contributed to raising costs and increasing the role of conflict economies and war brokers in Syria.

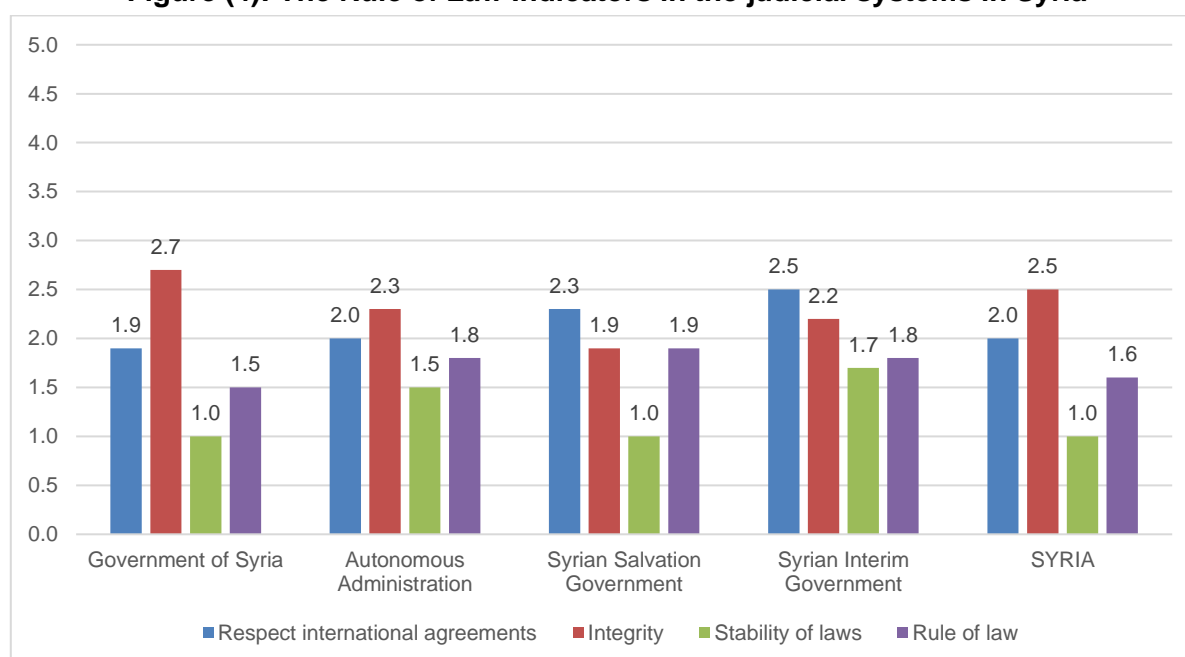
It's worth mentioning that all sanctioned parties have resorted to alternative means to adapt to sanctions, including finding commercial intermediaries in countries not subject to the international sanctions system or receiving support from allied nations. Networks associated with the conflict have also established channels to avoid sanctions, contributing to the flourishing of conflict economies and the emergence of a new class of intermediaries, solidifying a state of dependency, subservience, and the power of the influential.

### 3.1.3 Crushing of Public Space and the Absence of the Rule of Law

The judiciary in Syria has experienced a severe deterioration and transformation in its function amid the conflict. The Syrian government, being a party to the conflict, utilized legislative and judicial authority as tools of contention to exclude and punish any opposing voices through several enacted laws. This exploitation of judicial and legislative power is not a new phenomenon, as the regime's nature did not allow for the separation of powers before the conflict, and security apparatuses had a predominant role in controlling the judicial system.

The conflict forces in other areas of control adopted a similar approach to the Syrian government in spreading fear, subjugating society, and encroaching on the military and security forces on the judicial systems, asserting their dominance over law and society while remaining immune from accountability. The formal and informal justice references are fragmented among the four control areas. The indicators of the rule of law and respect for international treaties were weak both nationally and in all areas of control, while the integrity indicator was very weak both nationally and in all areas of control, according to the (Justice Priorities Survey SCPR, 2022).

**Figure (4): The Rule of Law Indicators in the judicial systems in Syria**



Note: The scale ranges from 1 to 5, where 1 signifies very poor, and 5 indicates very good.

Source: Syrian Center for Policy Research. (2022). [Justice Priorities Survey in Syria](#).

## 3.2 Human and Social Development

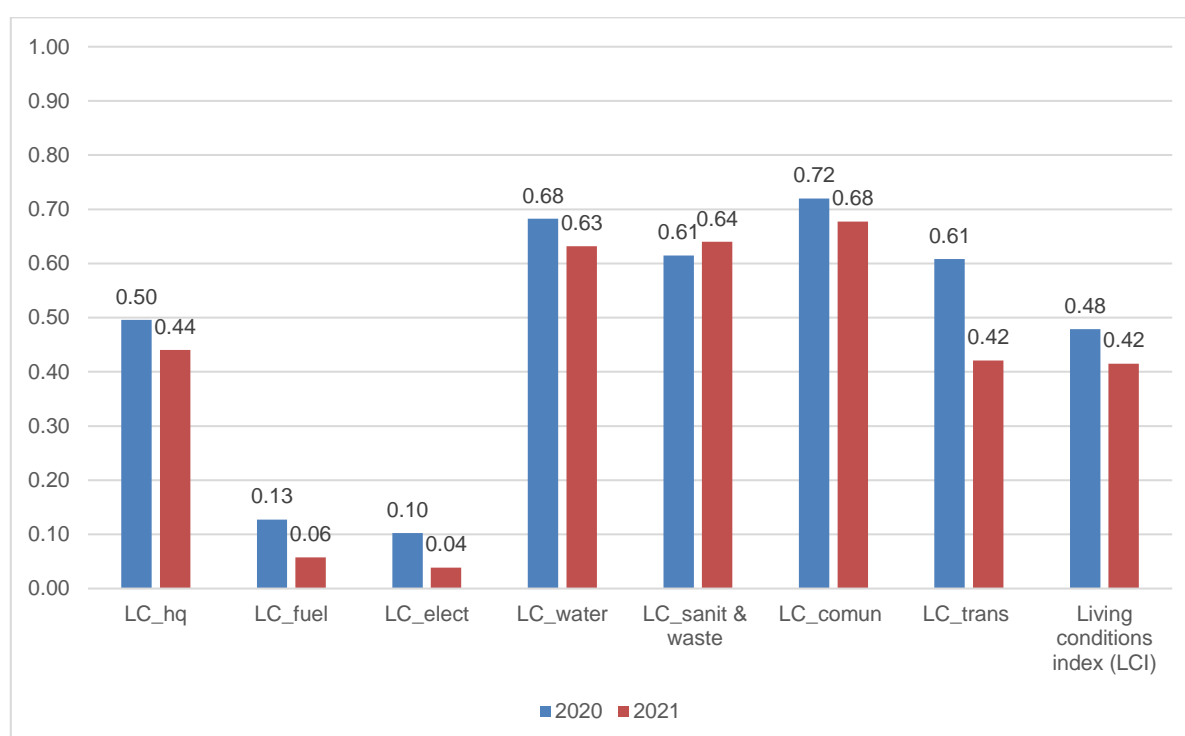
(Linked to Goals 1, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7)

The Human Development Index (HDI)<sup>10</sup> in Syria decreased by 62 per cent in 2022 compared to 2010, indicating a deviation from the presumed development trajectory and the breakdown of the necessary social structures for empowerment and capacity building. As a result, people were deprived of access to food, health, and education services. Human development indicators reveal widening inequalities in Syria compared to the rest of the world (SCPR, 2022).

### 3.2.1 Inhumane Living Conditions

Key indicators from socioeconomic assessment surveys conducted by the Syrian Center for Policy Research during (2020-2022) showed a deterioration in economic and living conditions for Syrians. The “Living Conditions Index” declined across Syria, reaching a value of 0.42 in 2021 compared to 0.48 in 2020, reflecting poor housing conditions, fuel deprivation, electricity, clean water, and safe sanitation.

**Figure (5): Components of the Living Conditions Index in Syria during the years 2020 and 2021**



Source: Syrian Center for Policy Research (2022). [Socioeconomic assessment surveys in Syria during the years 2020, 2021 and 2022.](#)

<sup>10</sup> The Human Development Index (HDI) is a composite index that ranges between 0 and 1 and consists of 3 sub-indicators: Education, Health, and food security. According to this measure, 0 signifies very poor, and 1 indicates very good.

- **Deteriorating housing conditions:** Military operations, which included the targeting of civilian areas and facilities, such as health and educational institutions, along with looting, siege, and forced displacement, had a direct impact on the quality and safety of housing in numerous regions across Syria, resulting in a significant disparity in housing conditions among various Syrian governorates and the widespread establishment of informal settlements due to the urgent need for housing. The demand for housing, coupled with the absence of oversight and limited resources, led to the construction of housing units lacking safe living conditions or the restoration of damaged homes without consideration for engineering standards and safety requirements. On the contrary, major cities experienced the proliferation of informal housing areas and non-compliant buildings, a trend that increased significantly during the years of conflict.
- **Fuel deprivation:** Accessing heating fuel emerges as one of the most overwhelming challenges for residents in Syria. Consequently, most individuals depended on low-quality diesel or hazardous materials for heating. The Syrian government decreased the designated fuel quantity for households and increased its prices multiple times in the last two years. Therefore, many turned to acquiring fuel from the informal market at prices multiplied higher than the official rate or sought environmentally unsafe fuel alternatives.
- **Electricity Deprivation:** Various Syrian regions experienced a severe shortage of electrical energy, leading to long periods of outages that negatively impacted most economic and living conditions for Syrians. In some governorates, dependence on purchasing amperes from private generators at high prices has increased. Moreover, reliance on renewable energies, especially solar, remained limited in most regions due to the high cost of installation and maintenance, as well as the difficulty in ensuring quality.
- **Water and Sanitation Deprivation:** Families in many regions suffered from water scarcity, and sanitation services deteriorated due to the damage to infrastructure during the conflict, declining capabilities of providing public services, and energy shortages. Despite repairing damages in some of these areas, most residents, especially in refugee camps and in Idleb governorate, continued to experience frequent water interruptions or a decrease in water quality, forcing them to buy water tanks. The damage to sewage networks and the lack of maintenance led to a severe consequence due to the leakage of contaminated water into groundwater and water networks.

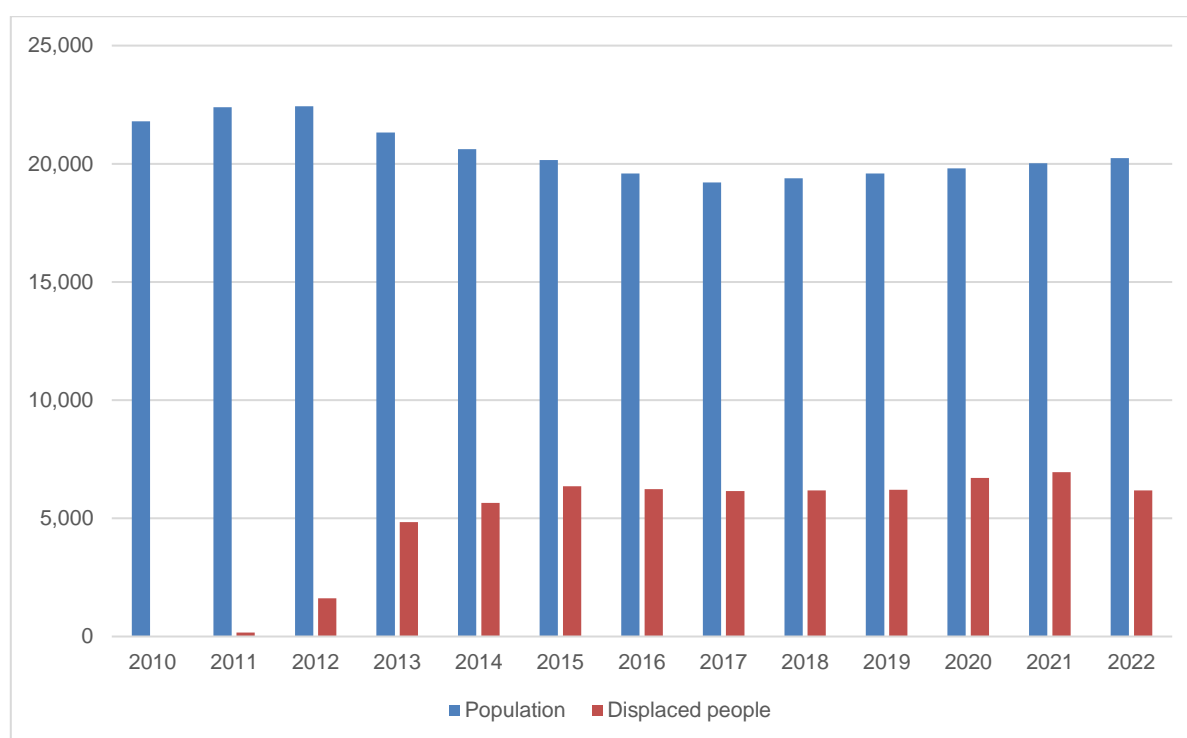
It is worth mentioning that the Syrian government claimed in its report the ability to achieve some of the objectives of Goal 6 (clean water and sanitation) by 2030, with the percentage of the population benefiting from safe drinking water services reaching 94 per cent in 2022 (the same percentage as in 2010). The share of treated household wastewater flowing safely was 41 per cent in 2022, compared to 50 per cent in 2010, and the share of industrial wastewater treated safely was 50 per cent in 2022, compared to 72 per cent in 2010. However, the situation of the water and sanitation network in the provinces of Deir-Ezzor, Ar-Raqqa, Al-Hasakeh, and Idleb, bombed and destructed, has not been considered. No qualitative maintenance has been conducted in the government-controlled areas of (Tartous, Lattakia, Rural Damascus, and Homs) since the conflict began, where sewage leaks have occurred

repeatedly in some government areas due to the damage to the public network, the over-drafting of groundwater, and a significant decrease in rainfall.

### 3.2.2 Forced Displacement

The population of Syria reached 20.4 million in 2022, according to estimates from the Syrian Center for Policy Research. The conflict has induced shifts in the population structure, driven by several factors such as an increase in male mortality compared to females, fluctuating death rates across different age groups, changes in fertility rates, and the repercussions of displacement and forced migration. Internally displaced persons numbered 6.18 million in 2022, around 31 per cent of the national population. Among the displaced, 26 per cent concentrated in Idlib and 18 per cent in Aleppo. Most of them reside in primarily rented houses, with relatives, or in camps and shelters.<sup>11</sup>

**Figure (6): Population inside Syria, including displaced persons 2010-2022, (thousands of people)**



Source: Syrian Center for Policy Research 2022.

The number of Syrian refugees abroad is estimated to exceed 6.8 million, according to the Global Trends Report for 2022 released by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2022). These refugees sought safety in Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, and other host countries. Syrian refugees face various forms of injustice categorised into three dimensions: access and mobility, human development, recognition, expression, and participation. Although these dimensions are interconnected, studying each reveals the substantial and increasing deprivation experienced by refugees (SCPR, 2020).

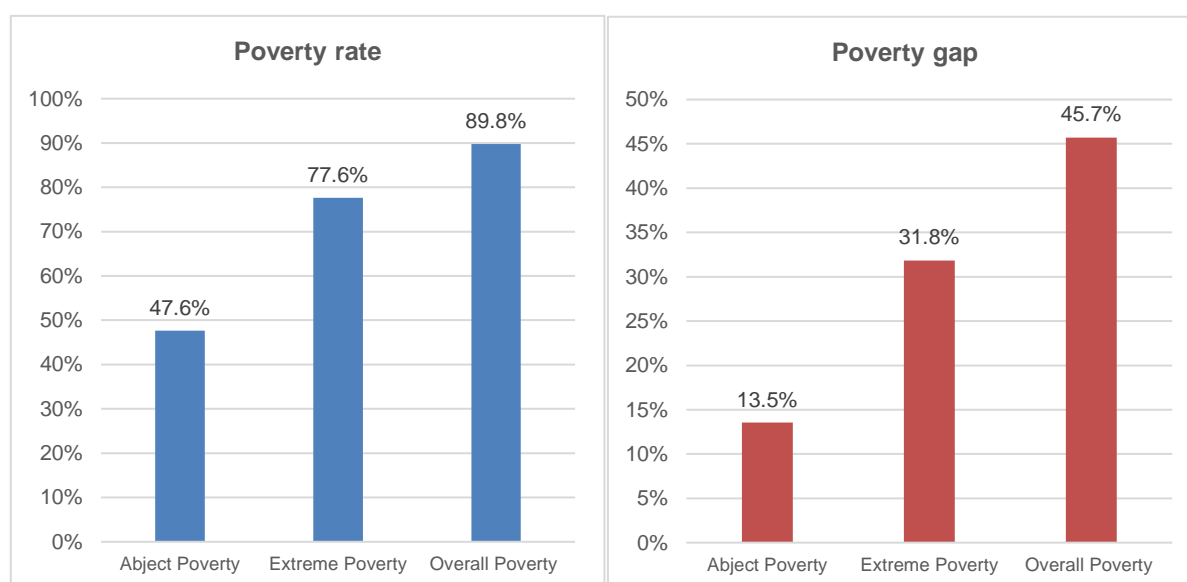
<sup>11</sup>Syrian Center for Policy Research. (2022). Socioeconomic assessment surveys in Syria during the years 2020, 2021 and 2022.

The conditions for a safe, voluntary, and dignified return of Syrian refugees remain challenging. The failure to meet any of the 22 protection thresholds set by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is not limited to any specific part of Syria. Those who have voluntarily returned have faced various risks, as confirmed by reports from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria. These reports document incidents of arbitrary detention, forced disappearance, kidnapping, torture, sexual violence, and extrajudicial execution. Even those who obtained security clearances before their return were not spared from these severe human rights violations. Both the European Union and the High Commissioner have affirmed that Syria is not safe for return. Returnees from refugees to Syria constitute less than 7 per cent of the total Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries, with 38,235 in 2020, 35,980 in 2021, and 50,966 in 2022.<sup>12</sup>

### 3.2.3 The Aggravation of Poverty

Indicators of poverty reveal the widespread extreme and severe poverty throughout Syria, as the majority of families struggle to provide adequate necessities. In 2022, the family poverty line reached monthly SYP 1.64 million, based on the estimations of the Syrian Center for Policy Research. The minimum poverty line, reflecting a family's capacity to meet basic needs, stood at approximately SYP 1.19 million, while the extreme poverty line, indicating food deprivation, was around SYP 754 thousand.<sup>13</sup> The income-poverty gap doubled in 2022, exacerbating disparities between governorate and controlled areas. The overall, severe, and extreme poverty rates reached 90 per cent, 78 per cent, and 48 per cent, respectively, in 2022, with the poverty gap approaching 46 per cent of the highest poverty line.

**Figure (7): Poverty rate and gap in Syria during 2022**



Source: Syrian Center for Policy Research. (2023). [SCPR'S Annual Bulletin for Consumer Price Index and Inflation in Syria 2022](#). Issue 1.

<sup>12</sup> UNHCR. (2023). [The Operational Data Portal \(ODP\)](#).

<sup>13</sup> Syrian Center for Policy Research. (2023). [SCPR'S Annual Bulletin for Consumer Price Index and Inflation in Syria 2022](#). Issue 1.

The conflict in Syria has led to a significant transformation in the income sources of families, characterised by a growing dependence on aid, financial transfers from relatives and friends abroad, and the liquidation of assets following the depletion of savings and loss of income sources.

### 3.2.4 The Right to Health Violation

The use of collective punishment, including the denial of healthcare and food services, emerged as a fundamental tactic employed during the conflict, specifically targeting certain groups, communities, and designated areas. Regions outside of government control suffered the severe consequences of deteriorating health status. The population continued to endure the aftermath of the conflict, marked by its catastrophic impact on public health, resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths and millions of injuries to both men and women, which reflects a blatant disregard for the right to life and the right to health. The consequences are evident in elevated death rates, a decline in life expectancy at birth, and increased rates of diseases, including infectious ones such as cholera, measles, leishmaniasis, and COVID-19, as well as non-communicable diseases like hypertension, heart diseases, cancer, disability, and malnutrition.

The conflict deliberately destroyed the social determinants of public health, leading to fragmentation and regression of the healthcare system. Examples include the direct military targeting of institutions and medical personnel, undermining the governance of the health sector. Individuals face numerous obstacles in accessing healthcare services due to a lack of specialised services, shortages in expertise and medications, as well as infrastructure destruction and deficiencies. One of the most devastating effects of the conflict is the increase in death rates among different population groups, with the crude death rate rising from 4.4 per thousand population in 2010 to 7.0 per thousand population in 2019.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, rates of infectious and non-communicable diseases, such as polio, measles, influenza-like illnesses, acute diarrhoea, typhoid, leishmaniasis (Aleppo boil), paralysis, and psychological trauma, have escalated.

The government review highlights that the Syrian government can achieve all the objectives of Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-being) by 2030, attributing this to factors like the widespread distribution of health infrastructure, efficient human resources, and a thriving pharmaceutical industry. However, this review from the Syrian government overlooks significant issues, including 700,000 deaths, over 2 million disabled individuals, alarming morbidity rates, governance distortion in the health sector, extensive destruction of health infrastructure, fragmentation among the four control areas, difficulties in accessing healthcare services, poor quality of healthcare services, and the emigration of equipped medical personnel. Additionally, pharmaceutical factories are ceasing production due to citizens' diminishing purchasing power and the high costs of importing raw materials, which is exacerbating the continuous increase in drug prices.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Syrian Center for Policy Research. (2020). [Justice to Transcend Conflict](#).

<sup>15</sup> Syrian Center for Policy Research. (2023). [The Devastating Right to Health during the Syrian Conflict](#).



### 3.2.5 Deprivation of Education

The education sector incurred significant losses during the conflict, experiencing the fragmentation of the educational system into distorted and politicized structures. Challenges included a shortage of qualified teachers, diverse curricula, and deterioration of education quality. Infrastructure, buildings, and facilities suffered severe damage, with many repurposed, such as for the housing of IDPs. Discrimination and siege policies further hindered adolescents' access to schools. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges due to school closures, lack of alternatives, health concerns, and the absence of precautionary measures. Insecurity and the growing poverty of households both contributed to an increase in school dropout rates.

On the other hand, the deterioration of public educational services has resulted in an increased role for civil society and the private sector in education, although their contributions remain modest compared to the extensive educational loss. Enrolment rates in primary education reveal that millions of children are deprived of educational opportunities in varying degrees, with the percentage of non-enrolled children in primary education reaching approximately 45 per cent during 2014-2017 and decreasing to around 34 per cent during the period (2018-2022).<sup>16</sup>

Syrians continue to endure the loss of millions of educational years, with the number of out-of-school children aged 5 to 17 reaching about 2.4 million in 2019. This ongoing toll is catastrophic, as millions of children will experience deficits in skills and knowledge, along with other consequences of the conflict.

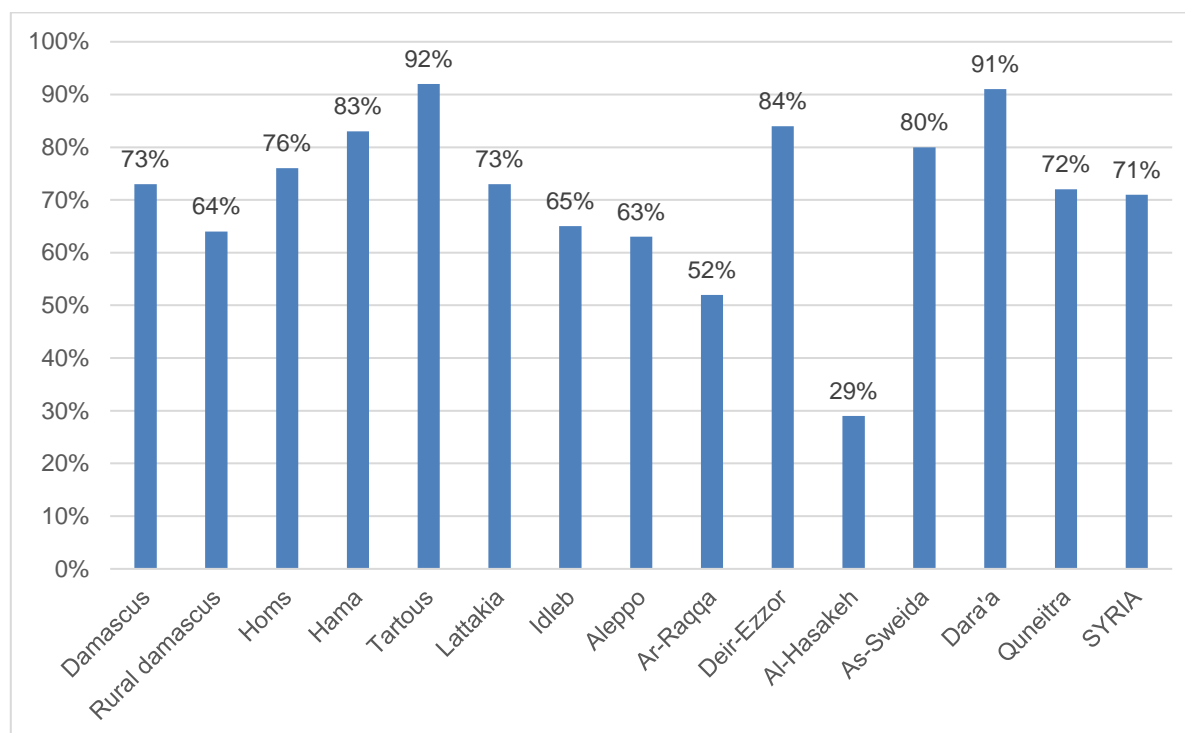
The conflict disrupted the consistency of school curricula across Syria due to the establishment of different educational systems in each region based on the ruling powers there. The direct loss of primary education years was estimated at 1.47 million years in 2019. The overall loss in primary education reached 25.5 million student years by 2019 compared to the continuous scenario. Simultaneously, the total loss in education years for all levels was approximately 46 million years between 2011 and 2019, with the estimated cost of this loss around 34.6 billion US dollars.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Syrian Center for Policy Research. (2022). ["Hope Under Siege" Voices of adolescents on education and ICT during the Syrian Conflict.](#)

<sup>17</sup>Syrian Center for Policy Research. (2020). [Justice to Transcend Conflict.](#)

**Figure (8): Enrolment rate in primary education in Syria by governorate during 2022 (percentage)**



Source: Syrian Center for Policy Research 2022. Socioeconomic assessment surveys in Syria during the years 2020, 2021 and 2022.

The government review claimed the feasibility of achieving the fourth goal (Quality and Inclusive Education) by “ensuring a good distribution of infrastructure and human resources and relying on local workforce needs.” However, it did not mention how to address the loss of 46 million educational years during the war. The review overlooks a substantial increase in dropout rates, particularly in Ar-Raqqa and Deir-Ezzor governorate, where ISIS held control for several years, leading to the suspension of educational activities. In 2022, the primary education enrolment rate in Ar-Raqqa was only around 29 per cent, and in Deir-Ezzor, it stood at 52 per cent (as shown in Figure 8). Most children have discontinued their education, and a significant portion has not re-enrolled due to their inability to bridge the learning gap after a 5-year interruption.

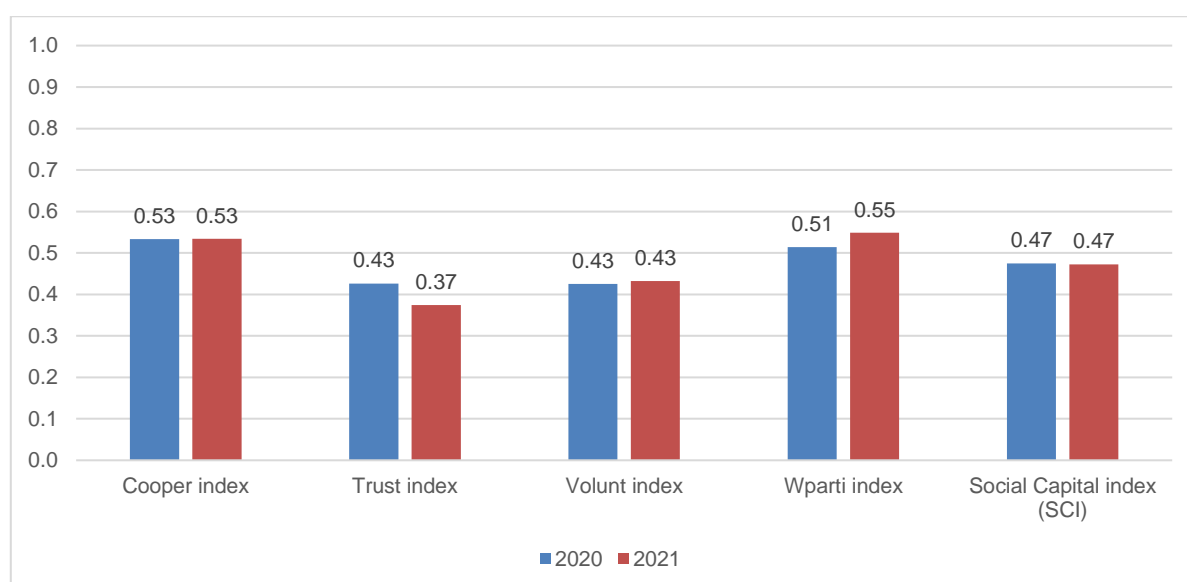
Furthermore, the government review neglects the fragmentation of curricula into multiple systems, the repercussions of frequent displacement, and the rise in child labour to cover living costs against a poor economic situation and the loss of the breadwinner. Displaced people who lost their homes, property, and sources of livelihood were the most affected groups. Additionally, it fails to acknowledge the substantial destruction of schools, with some repurposed for military activities and others transformed into shelter centres due to continuous bombing and destruction.

### 3.2.6 Deterioration of Social Capital

The Social Capital Index<sup>18</sup> witnessed a 42 per cent decline from 2010 to 2022, a period marked by persistent use of violence and intimidation by controlling powers to suppress the population. Identity-based discrimination policies emerged as a central strategy to exacerbate conflicts, exploiting differences in religion, nationality, regions, economic and social backgrounds, as well as traditional relationships, to foster fragmentation and polarisation, ultimately leading to *exclusion and dehumanising the other*. This decline in social capital reflected a significant aggravation of social injustice, resulting in the deterioration of social relations and shared values, damaging social solidarity, and undermining people's capabilities and will.

- **loss of societal trust:** Social trust has experienced a widespread decline throughout Syria, manifested on multiple levels. Interpersonal trust has been profoundly impacted by authoritarian practices like murder, forced disappearances, torture, and sieges. Simultaneously, there has been a pervasive loss of the overall sense of security attributed to occurrences of kidnapping, arbitrary arrests, and a surge in crimes such as theft, looting, and exploitation, as well as community and family violence. The conflict has intensified divisions between individuals and communities regarding common values and visions. Influential political entities have exploited these divisions to polarize and escalate the conflict.
- **Human Rights Violations:** The violation of Syrians' rights without accountability and the continued dominance of conflict elites have contributed to the loss of hope for change among many social segments, including children and adolescents. Individuals' resorts to traditional relationships expanded during the conflict, such as relationships based on kinship and religion.

**Figure (9): Social Capital Index and Its Components in Syria During 2020 and 2021**



Source: SCPR, [Socioeconomic assessment surveys in Syria during the years 2020, 2021 and 2022](#).

<sup>18</sup> Social Capital Index SCI: It is a composite index that takes a value between 0 and 1 and consists of three sub-indices: the social networks and participation index, the trust index, and the shared values index. Zero is the worst value, and one is the best, according to this scale.

- **Discrimination against IDPs:** Discrimination Against IDPs: This situation has left its mark on the relationships between residents of different areas and those who sought refuge or migrated to their regions. Despite several community initiatives that exuded a spirit of solidarity during various stages of the conflict, their impact doesn't appear to be evident in establishing a truly inclusive environment for these displaced individuals. Instead, these efforts often took on an exploitative shape, contributing to the politicisation of differences and exacerbating polarization.
- **Discrimination against children and adolescents:** Children and adolescents endured three categories of violations during the conflict. The first involves “grave violations” connected to the conflict environment, severely impacting their lives. These include child labour, food insecurity reaching famine levels, forced displacement leading to family separation or the loss of family members, poverty, inadequate living conditions, lack of health and education services, and social fragmentation. The second category is “serious violations,” encompassing children’s exposure to abduction, detention, siege, and forced recruitment. For example, the National Defence Forces, Iranian militias, and Hezbollah have actively recruited children in government-controlled areas. Armed opposition forces have also established training camps for children under 18, known as “Altawheed Camps,” and the Autonomous Administration has recruited and trained children, providing them with salaries and compensation.<sup>19</sup> The third category is “tragic violations,” illustrating the direct loss of the right to life for Syrian children and adolescents, with many being killed or injured during the conflict.<sup>20</sup>

### 3.2.7 Gender Inequality

The conflict has generated societal dynamics that do not necessarily uphold rights and freedoms, promote equality and fairness, or cultivate respect for others and the advancement of a collaborative culture, which is particularly evident in the realm of gender rights. Despite the transformative shifts in traditional gender roles during the conflict, driven by security and economic necessities, this transformation does not appear to have effectively challenged the rooted culture of masculinity or led to substantial institutional changes that safeguard the limited rights acquired through this transformation.

Women, in particular, have encountered unprecedented levels of oppression. Despite expanding their economic and social roles during the conflict, the dominance of oppressive forces has resulted in constraining women’s participation and imposing discriminatory restrictions on them. Women have endured grave violations, including murder, detention, abduction, gender-based violence, harsh working conditions, and intensified economic responsibilities—especially among displaced families or widowed women. Additionally, women have been subjected to recurring incidents of underage and common-law marriages, trafficking, and various forms of exploitation. They have also endured political, social, and economic exclusion.

<sup>19</sup> The Day After. (2022). [Mechanisms of Exploitation: Economic and Social Changes in Syria During the Conflict.](#)

<sup>20</sup> Syrian Center for Policy Research. (2022). [“Hope Under Siege” Voices of adolescents on education and ICT during the Syrian Conflict.](#)

The Syrian legal framework is considered discriminatory under multiple laws. It lacks specific legislation and institutional mechanisms to address violence against women and girls. Moreover, the provisions of the Penal Code are insufficient to protect women and girls. The most adversely affected are refugee and displaced women, detained women, and those residing in besieged areas. Syrian women have faced the most severe forms of violence, with girls suffering from restricted access to education (when ISIS took control of some areas) and forced early marriages. Levels of sexual violence against women have surged significantly since the onset of the conflict, perpetrated by various militias and authorities.

The fourth paragraph of Article 3 of the 2012 Syrian Constitution acknowledges that the personal status of Syrian men and women is subject to their religious sects. Personal status laws contain discriminatory provisions against women related to marriage, divorce, guardianship, custody, inheritance, sexual health, the legitimacy of early marriage, and polygamy. Moreover, several articles in the penal code still discriminate against women. Nationality law prohibits women from granting their nationality to their children. Additionally, labour law discriminates against women by depriving those working in the agricultural sector and home factories of maternity leave. Furthermore, it lacks any provisions to prevent sexual harassment and protect both male and female workers.

In the legislative realm, Legislative Decree No. 2 of 2023 was issued concerning the regulation of the affairs of children with unknown parentage and their care. This decree established the Independent Authority regulating the affairs of these children. However, a child born to a Syrian mother is still considered of unknown parentage, as Syrian women are not permitted to confer their nationality upon their children according to Syrian nationality law.<sup>21</sup>

It is worth noting that the Government Review report claims to be able to achieve various objectives of the fifth goal (Gender Equality) by 2030, particularly those related to educational fairness. The report claims that challenges in achieving other objectives were attributed to “the lack of social awareness among citizens regarding the political and administrative empowerment of women.” In reality, women experience marginalisation and systematic exploitation by political, security, economic, and social authorities.

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<sup>21</sup> EuroMed Feminist Initiative. (2021). [Common Agenda for Combating Violence Against Women and Girls and a Major Barrier to Women's Participation in Syria.](#)

### **3.3 Economic Pillar**

(Linked to Goals 2, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 17)

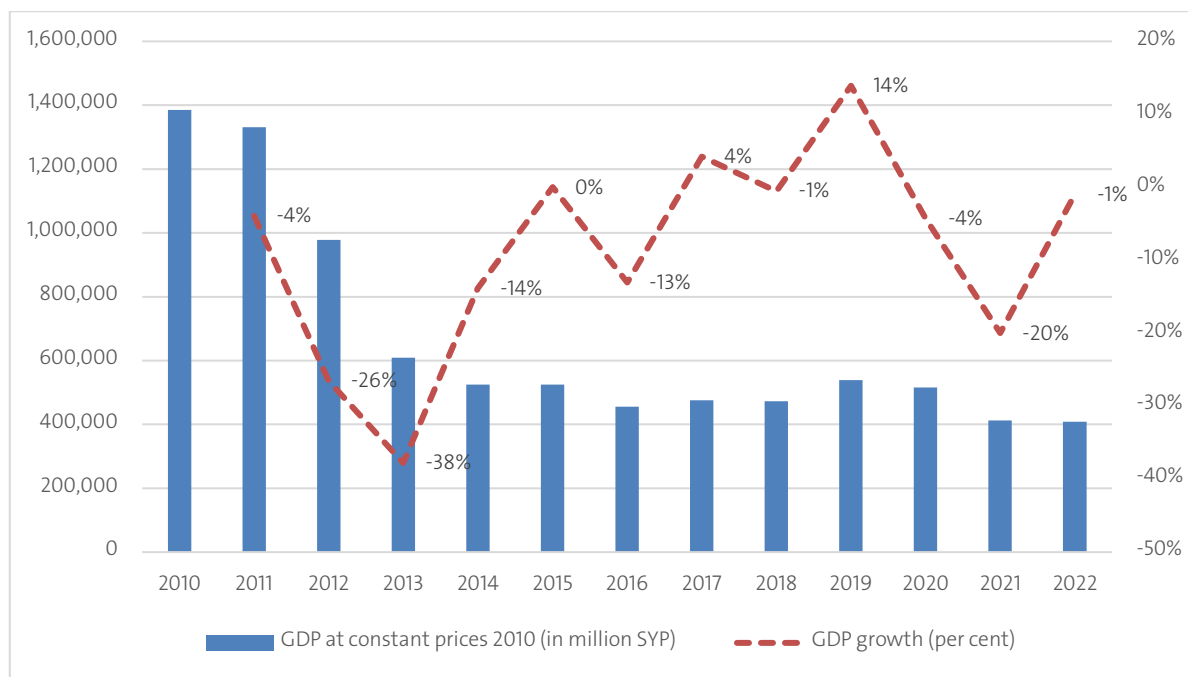
#### **3.3.1 Economic Deterioration and the Scale of Conflict Losses**

The total losses of the conflict exceeded 650 billion US dollars by the end of 2022. Despite the decline in military operations, the damage to production infrastructure continued in Idlib, the north-east and the western regions, including markets, facilities, schools and hospitals. Additionally, missed opportunities for recovery, redirecting a significant portion of resources toward increased military and security spending exacerbated economic and developmental losses.

The deterioration of Syria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2022 reached 17.9 billion US dollars compared to 56.5 billion US dollars in 2010. The economic contraction persisted by about 21 per cent between 2020 and 2022, highlighting the profound imbalances of the economy due to the dominance of conflict economies, poor governance, and the loss of human and material capital. Governance failure and instability represent the primary causes of economic and developmental imbalances. Additionally, the fragmentation of the Syrian economy among controlling forces is considered one of the factors that doubled the burdens and reduced development opportunities. Subjugation to external forces in determining developmental and economic priorities hindered the potential for Syrian economic recovery, including their direct "appropriation" of resources or economic opportunities.

The agricultural sector faced a sharp contraction in 2021 due to drought, impacting both plant and animal wealth and affecting various aspects of living standards, resulting in a heightened food deficit for Syrians across all regions, particularly in the northeastern area. In 2021, there was a decline in oil and gas production and electricity generation, leading to economic paralysis in most regions. Meanwhile, the northwestern region continued to rely heavily on high-cost imports of derivatives and electricity. The manufacturing sector experienced significant deterioration in 2020 and 2021, attributed to an unfavourable investment environment, energy shortages, and weakened domestic demand. Furthermore, government services witnessed a decline, accompanied by a decrease in the real value of public sector wages.

**Figure (10): Economic growth in Syria during the period (2011-2021)**



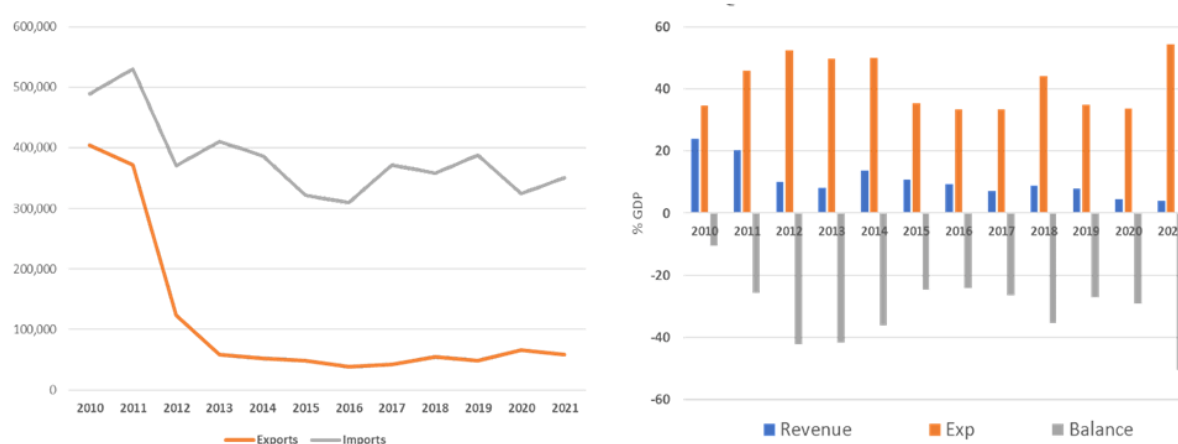
Source: Syrian Center for Policy Research 2022

The government review claimed the ability to achieve Goal 2, focused on enhancing agricultural productivity (eradicating hunger and sustainable agriculture) by 2030. However, it overlooked several challenges, including the reduction in arable land percentage due to conflict, natural factors such as fires and drought, increased costs of production essentials like fertilizers, fuels, and pesticides, increased expenses for agricultural labour, reduced prices for crops bought by the government, increased transportation costs, in addition to imposing royalties, farmer migration, and a reduced capacity to adopt agricultural technologies.

### 3.3.2 Fiscal and Trade Deficit

In 2021, the trade deficit soared to approximately 70 per cent of the GDP, with imports exceeding exports by six times. This substantial disparity is addressed through debts or humanitarian aid, solidifying the state's economic dependency and exposing the economy to new shocks with fluctuations in aid flow or loan provision. The state's general budget deficit reached 50 per cent of the GDP in 2021, with public spending focusing on military expenses, salaries, wages, and essential goods support. Moreover, the rapid resolution of the budget deficit through internal loans from the central bank accelerated currency devaluation and increased the inflationary pressures to a record level in recent years.

**Figure (11): State's general budget and the export-import gap for the period 2010-2021**



Source: Syrian Center for Policy Research 2022

On the other hand, working in the military field became an appealing prospect for individuals driven by financial incentives. The operational focus of public institutions shifted towards supporting military activities. Consequently, a significant portion of the state's general budget was allocated to military expenditures, encompassing salaries for the armed forces, national defence, and auxiliary military, establishing a fundamental pillar in the state's overall budget. To sustain this, investments and developmental spending were reduced to less than 10 per cent of the total allocations. Governmental military spending during the conflict surged by 24 billion US dollars. Concerning armed factions, it is anticipated that military expenditures will amount to 13.8 billion US dollars.

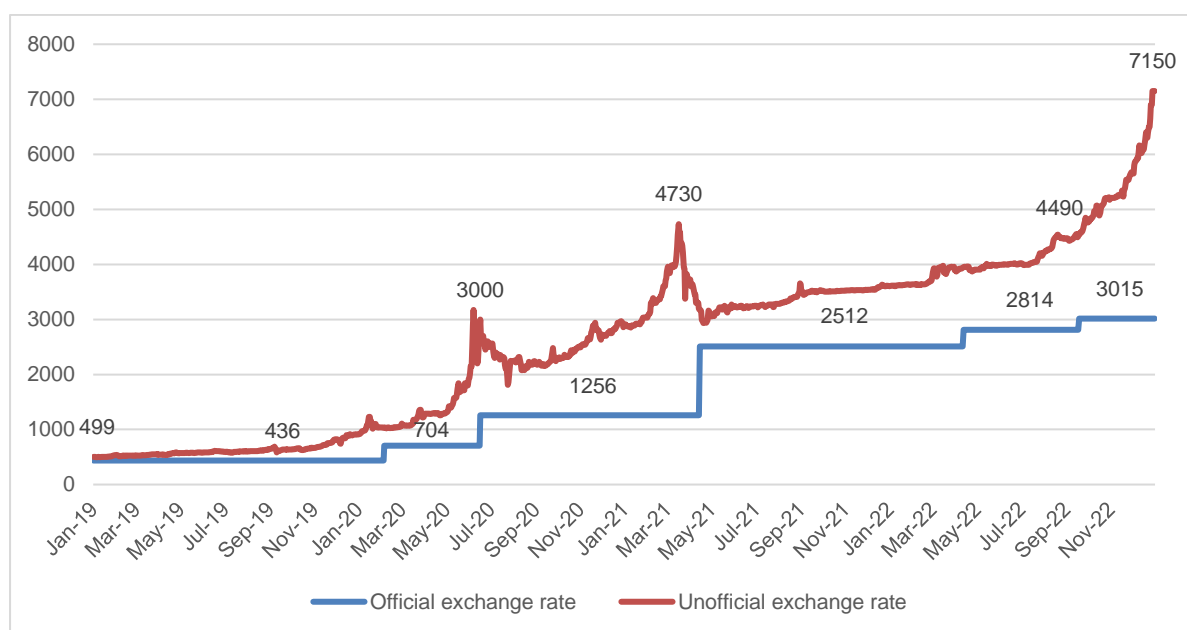
The mounting debt increases the dependence of Syrian economic institutions on external forces, and the accumulation of external public debt becomes a burden on future generations. Its share rose from 7 per cent of the GDP in 2010 to 254 per cent in 2021. As these loans were primarily used to cover current expenditures and conflict-related activities, additional loans will be necessary in the post-conflict era, amplifying public debt and exacerbating the state of submission and dependency.



### 3.3.3 Inflation and Exchange Rate Deterioration

During the conflict, the Central Bank of Syria lost control over the cash and credit supply as the nation splintered into different territories controlled by opposing factions. The central bank's reserves depleted, leading to the financing of government spending by unrestricted money printing. While various regions continued to use the Syrian Lira for transactions, with an exception for the northwestern areas of Syria resorted to using the Turkish Lira and the US Dollar. The value of the Syrian Lira significantly deteriorated against the US Dollar over the past three years, witnessing a decline of 215 per cent in 2020, 75 per cent in 2021, and 29 per cent in 2022.

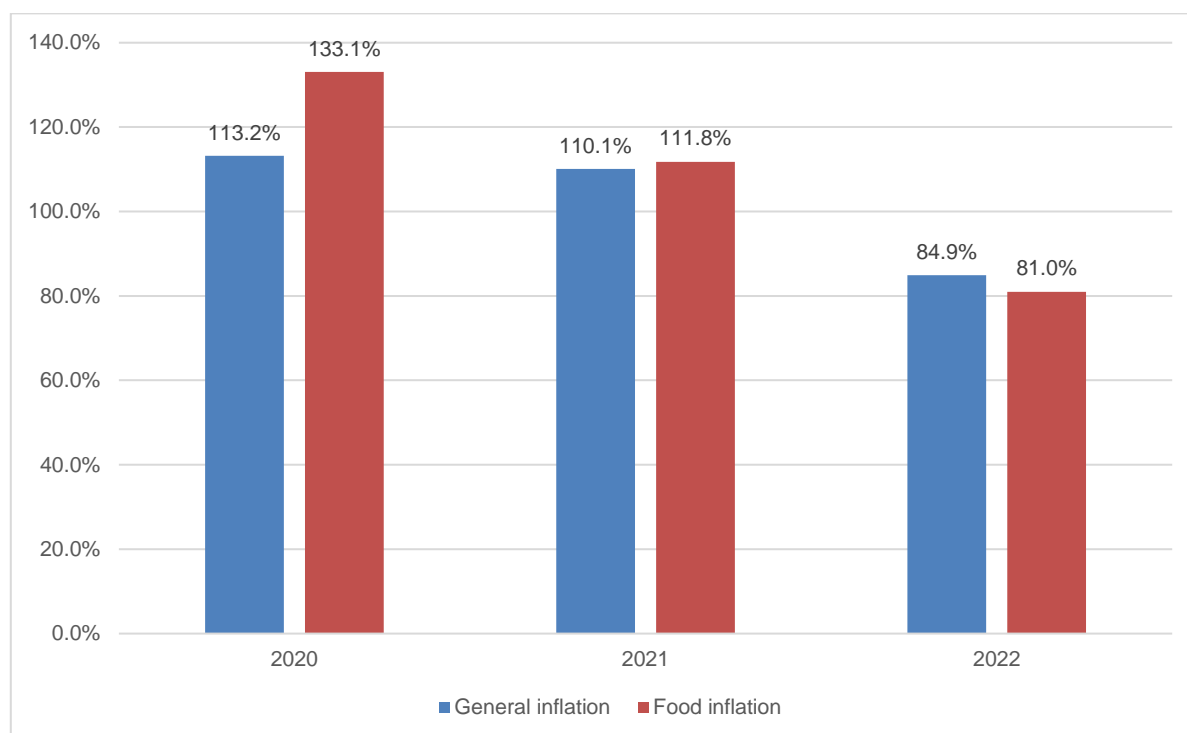
**Figure (12): Fluctuation of the exchange rate of the Syrian pound against the US dollar during the period (2019-2022)**



Source: Syrian Center for Policy Research based on the Central Bank of Syria bulletins official rate.

The economy experienced significant inflation over the past three years. Monthly surveys conducted by the Syrian Center for Policy Research reveal that the general price index surged over eightfold in 2022 compared to 2019. The annual inflation rate (Y-o-Y) reached 113 per cent in 2020, 110 per cent in 2021, and 85 per cent in 2022. Similarly, the prices of food commodities witnessed annual inflation rates of 133 per cent, 112 per cent, and 81 per cent in 2020, 2021, and 2022, respectively.<sup>22</sup>

**Figure (13): The Development of the inflation rate in Syria during the period (2020-2022)**



Source: Syrian Center for Policy Research. (2023). [Annual Bulletin for Consumer Price Index and Inflation in Syria 2022](#) – Issue 1.

<sup>22</sup>Syrian Center for Policy Research. (2023). [SCPR'S Annual Bulletin for Consumer Price Index and Inflation in Syria 2022](#). Issue 1.

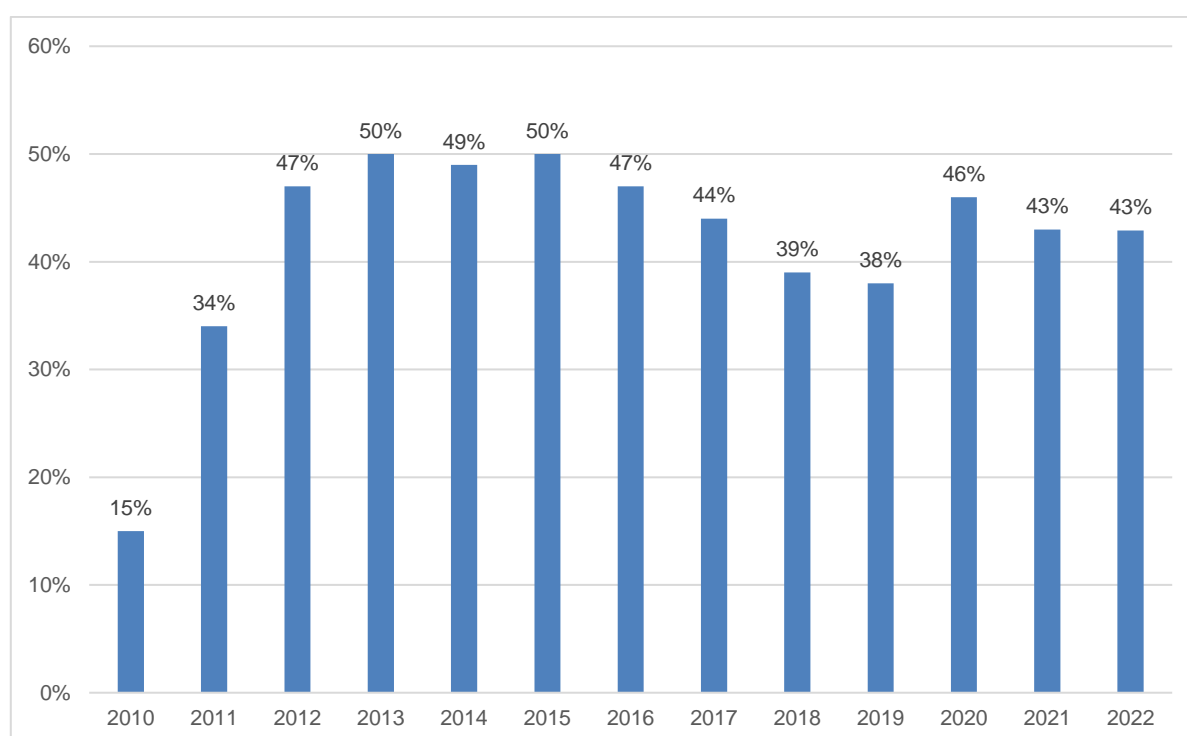
### 3.3.4 Rising Unemployment Rates

The economic deterioration is reflected in the continued high unemployment rates, reaching 43 per cent over the last two years, paralysing individuals' ability to participate in economic activity, accompanied by many people losing education, training, and rehabilitation opportunities, negatively impacting both the quantity and quality of human capital. This expansion of military and security activities attracted significant segments of youth to participate directly in the conflict. Moreover, there was a growing involvement in illicit activities such as smuggling and drug trafficking.

Decent working conditions were scarce during the conflict, exacerbated by limited opportunities, a pressing need for employment, and systematic policies exploiting individuals and resources. Nepotism and security constraints dominated the job-seeking process, and discrimination based on political, gender, and social backgrounds became widespread. Meanwhile, real wages deteriorated, social protection disappeared, and child labour increased in an unstable and unsafe environment.

Total employment experienced a sharp decline during the conflict, from 5.184 million workers in 2011 to 2.568 million workers in 2016, then gradually rising to 3.058 million workers in 2019. The unemployment rate surged from 14.9 per cent in 2011 to 51.8 per cent in 2016, then decreased to 42.3 per cent in 2019, and only rose again to 42.9 per cent in 2022. Compared to the continuous scenario, the labour market lost 3.7 million job opportunities, contributing to an increased economic dependency ratio from 4.13 persons per employed in 2010 to 6.4 persons in 2019.

**Figure (14): The unemployment rate in Syria during the period (2010-2022)**



Source: Syrian Center for Policy Research 2023.

### **3.4 Environmental Pillar**

(Linked to Goals 13, 14 and 15)

The conflict contributed to unprecedented pollution levels and depletion of natural resources, a consequence of policies enforced by military forces or adapted as a coping mechanism by the residents in response to deteriorating economic and social conditions. Environmental degradation has emerged as an aspect of injustice during the conflict, with the quantity and quality of weapons used posing a severe environmental threat to agricultural lands. Toxic substances have resulted in soil contamination, adversely affecting the quality and agricultural productivity of the land.

The conflict has led to the squandering of various natural resources, including forests and water resources, due to destruction or misuse, such as tree-cutting for heating or unsustainable well-drilling practices. Factors of waste and pollution impact the long-term sustainability of the environment, creating a situation of injustice affecting future generations (Jafar, 2021).<sup>23</sup>

A recent study by PAX, utilising satellite data analysis and open-source research, unveils the destructive impact of twelve years of war on forests and orchards in Syria, with over a third of forests being cut down. The results demonstrate that deforestation significantly affects the lives and livelihoods of civilians, with long-term consequences on their ability to adapt to climate change. Armed conflict is a major driver of natural resource destruction (PAX, 2023).<sup>24</sup>

The lack of access to electricity and fuel leads to widespread tree-cutting for heating and cooking, while displacement and intense fighting contribute to further deforestation (Socioeconomic Assessment Survey, SCPR, 2020, 2022; PAX, 2023). Millions of tons of rubble and the extraction of natural resources for the cement used in urban reconstruction are likely to pose significant risks to the local environment, as observed in the contexts of Lebanon and Iraq.<sup>25</sup>

Syria faces significant future environmental threats, including 1) drought and wildfires, 2) Earthquake damage (short and medium-term environmental impacts), and 3) climate change.

#### **3.4.1 Drought and Wildfires**

Syria has faced severe and prolonged drought, intensifying water shortages due to dry conditions during the rainy season and notably elevated temperatures. Reports of severe drought have emerged from various regions following consecutive months of scant rainfall between October 11, 2021, and May 2022. The water deficit worsened due to a drier-than-average climate in the rainy seasons of 2020-2021 and 2021-2022, coupled with increased evaporation linked to higher-than-usual air temperatures during the hot summer months from July to September. The Vegetation Health Index (VHI) indicates a decline in vegetation cover since April 2022, and drought has intensified across most parts of Syria. The situation in the

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<sup>23</sup> Gaafar, R. (2021). [The Environmental Impact of Syria's Conflict: A Preliminary Survey of Issues, Arab Reform Initiative.](#)

<sup>24</sup> PAX (2023). [Axed & Burned: How Conflict-caused Deforestation Impacts Environmental, Socioeconomic and Climate Resilience in Syria](#), PAX.

<sup>25</sup> Planetary Security Initiative (PSI). (2019). [In Syria, the Environmental Toll of War Beginning to Emerge.](#)

first week of October 2022 was more severe than in the same period in 2021, with extensive areas experiencing severe to extreme drought conditions type III and IV.<sup>26</sup>

Syria's coastal and central regions also witnessed multiple fires in previous years. The outbreak of these fires is attributed to warm eastern winds prevalent during the summer in Syria, dry grasses that ignite quickly amid decreased tree humidity, and rising temperatures. Human activities might also be a contributing factor.<sup>27</sup>

In 2023, most fires occurred in remote, rugged mountainous areas (Lattakia, Homs, Hama, Tartous). The intensity and size of forest fires altered climate systems, producing thermal cumulus clouds that trapped heat and generated strong winds, leading to more fire outbreaks. The powerful winds facilitated the spread of forest fires, with some jumping over highways and roads, causing material and environmental damage. These fires burned several homes, crops (the primary livelihood for many residents), and a significant portion of the natural cover, including plants, forests, and nature reserves.<sup>28</sup>

### 3.4.2 Earthquake Damage

The earthquake that struck Turkey and northern Syria in February 2023 resulted in thousands of casualties among Syrians in the affected areas, with a total of 10,659 individuals (4,267 in Turkey). The earthquake's impact within Syria caused 6,392 deaths and 11,829 injuries, with the most significant effects concentrated in northwestern Syria, particularly in Idlib province, where the death toll reached 2,985. The earthquake also led to the displacement of over 170,000 people, with a significant portion of earthquake evacuees joining existing camps and new camps being established to accommodate a large number of newly displaced individuals.

The earthquake further exacerbated the fragile healthcare sector due to the prolonged conflict and the health system's incapacity. When the earthquake occurred, the health system could not meet the increasing need to rescue and assist the affected individuals in various regions. Reports on communicable diseases indicated a rise in cases of cholera, acute diarrhoea, and respiratory diseases in different areas. The education process in earthquake-affected areas was also affected, as several schools were damaged or suffered substantial harm or turned into IDP shelters.

The losses in the capital stock and household wealth, including furniture and equipment, amounted to 0.8 per cent nationally, with concentrations in Idlib at 6.9 per cent and Aleppo at 2.1 per cent. In contrast, these losses were 6 per thousand in Lattakia and 3 per thousand in Hama. These losses from accumulated wealth represent a severe economic setback at both the national level and, particularly, in the affected regions. These areas will require many years to recover from the losses.

The Syrian Center for Policy Research estimated the replacement value of capital stock and furniture at around 2.23 billion US dollars at current prices. The earthquake's impact on Syria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was approximately 3.62 billion US dollars, and when adding the losses in capital stock, the total direct economic losses amounted to 5.85 billion US dollars.

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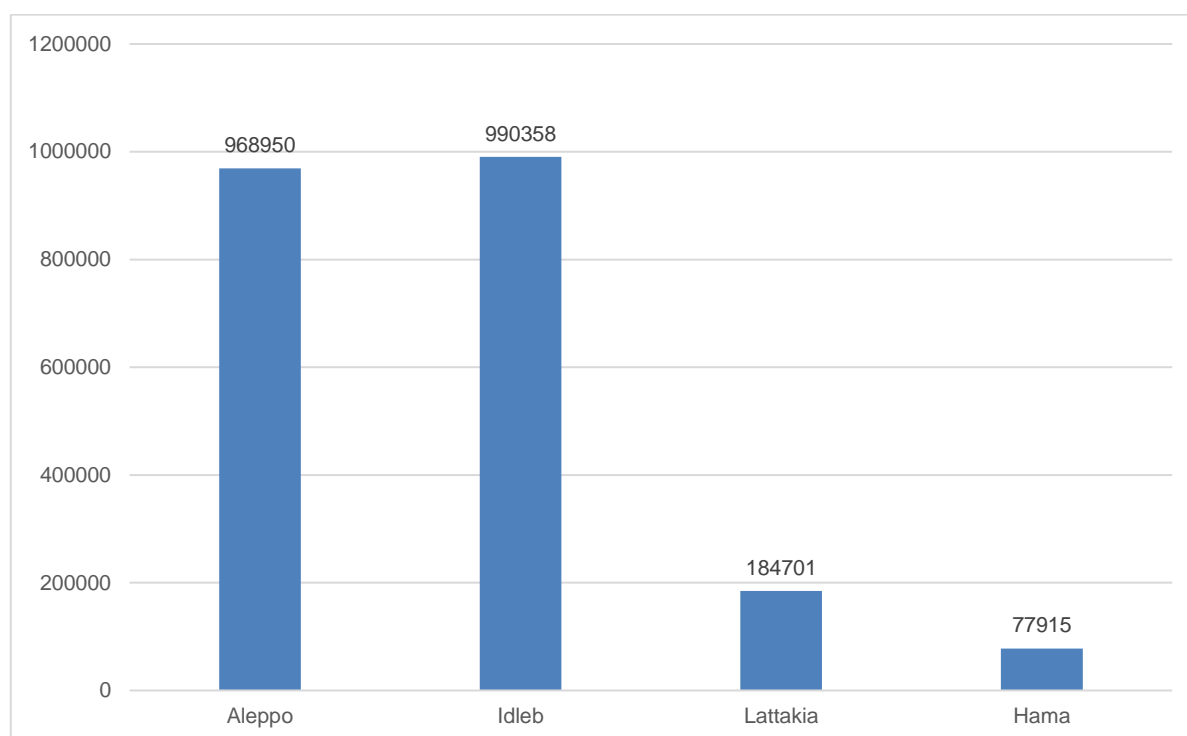
<sup>26</sup>OCHA (2022). [Syrian Arab Republic: 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview](#) (December 2022)

<sup>27</sup>IFRC. (2023). [Syria Wildfire 2023 - DREF operation \(MDRSY010\)](#)

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

The earthquake's direct losses represent about 33 per cent of the GDP for the year 2022, highlighting its significant relative impact amid the catastrophic state of the economy resulting from 12 years of conflict.<sup>29</sup>

**Figure (15): Estimated capital stock losses in the governorates affected by the earthquake in Syria (thousand US dollars)**



Source: Syrian Center for Policy Research. (2023). [The Impact of the Earthquake in Syria: The missing developmental perspective in the shadow of conflict.](#)

### 3.4.3 Climate Change

Climate change has led to a worrying reduction in pasture areas in southern Syria at an alarming rate due to the impacts of rising temperatures. The high temperatures and lack of rainfall, coupled with the destructive effects of the long-standing conflict in the region, have caused many water pumping stations to go out of service or become unsafe to access, rendering them non-functional.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Syrian Center for Policy Research. (2023). [The Impact of the Earthquake in Syria: The missing developmental perspective in the shadow of conflict.](#)

<sup>30</sup>IFRC. (2023). [South Syria Drafts 2023](#) - DREF operation (MDRSY011)

## 4. Conclusion

The present developmental course of Syria amid the conflict indicates a loss of more than five decades of development progress, manifested across various aspects politically, socially, economically, and environmentally. This report offers evidence of this substantial and ongoing decline, particularly when compared to the government review, which suffered from methodological imbalances in measurement, bias in evidence selection, and limitations in spatial-temporal scope.

The most alarming aspect regarding the development in Syria is the establishment of political, social, and economic foundations centred around conflict, leading to the erosion of developmental pillars. These foundations involve political tyranny, military and security dominance, conflict-driven economies, societal fragmentation, external forces seizing sovereignty and resources, and the entrenchment of severe human rights violations, together with the distortion of public institutions. These factors contribute to the continuation of “reverse development” resulting in a drastic departure from the 2023 sustainable development path. The government review failed to diagnose the roots and dynamics of the conflict, concentrating solely on external sanctions and terrorism, neglecting the pivotal role of the Syrian authorities in the conflict and the missed developmental opportunities for future generations.

An impartial diagnosis of developmental dynamics and outcomes is vital in charting a course for conflict resolution with broad societal participation. This contributes to addressing the components of conflict and investing in development initiatives rooted in justice, sustainability, peace, and prosperity. Achieving this objective necessitates coordinated efforts towards a fair and sustainable political solution.



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