

## **Assad: The Real "Butcher's Bill" in Syria**

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No one can deny the horrifying nature of images of babies and children that have been killed by nerve gas. It is critical, however, that these images be kept in perspective. This is only one atrocity among many in the history of the Syrian civil war since 2011, and in the history of the Assad regime. Assad has used poison gas many times before, and while nerve gas is the most lethal deployed form of chemical weapons, it kills relatively quickly and mercifully compared to the chlorine gas the Assad regime has used since it supposedly gave up its chemical weapons.

The image of chemical weapons is particularly horrifying. They kill silently and with little warning. No one, however, should have any illusions about being burned to death, the suffering caused by fragmentation wounds and collapsed buildings, by a gun shot, or by slowly dying of hunger, disease, or exposure when war drives you from your home.

Chemical weapons may be a useful excuse to act against Assad, but they are scarcely the core of the case against him. Bashar al-Assad came to power because of the ruthlessness of his father—Hafez al-Assad—who used massed artillery against his own people in an attack on Hama in 1982 to make it clear just how far his repression would go. Assad formally came to power in a rigged election, but was really chosen by his father, and then only as the result of a car accident that killed his brother—Bassel al-Assad—who had been designated as his father's original heir.

Assad had opportunity after opportunity to carry out political and economic reform after he came to power in July 2000. In each case, he either carried out token or limited reform in marginal ways or made no reforms at all, and chose to rely on repression and the support of a narrow elite at his people's expense. He ignored the plight of Syria's Kurds and other minorities and persecuted Sunnis and anyone else who openly or covertly opposed the regime.

The crisis in Syria in 2011 came after a decade in which Assad followed in his father's footsteps in making Syria more and more of a "failed state," the neglect of a drought in the East, and a grindingly slow rate of development and increase in Syria's per capita income. Millions and millions of Syrian had suffered, but Assad still had the option of staying in power through limited and peaceful reform. Instead, he chose repression and then violence and turned protest into civil war. In the process, he was all too successful in suppressing moderate reform, while he pushed far too many of his people into supporting violent extremism.

It is important to remember that limited amounts of U.S. and European force could have pushed him out of power at any time during the years that followed up to the point when Russian intervention began to rescue him in September 2015. At least in the early years, there were also still enough moderate rebels to offer a real hope for a new, negotiated government. The economic and human cost took time to become critical, although less than 100 killed in the recent chemical attack need to be compared to millions of displaced and refugees and over 100,000 dead civilians by 2013.

And what is the current "butcher's bill?" Chemical weapons are a vanishingly small part of the human cost. There are no reliable estimates of the number of Syrian civilians that have been killed and injured in the fighting, or exactly who is responsible, but most estimates reach 400,000 in early 2016, and the vast majority have clearly been killed or injured by the Assad regime. The UN ceased to estimate civilian casualties in early 2016 because of the inability to produce reliable estimates,

but the number almost certainly exceeded 400,000 in early 2016, and was probably closer to 500,000 by the end of 2016.

Casualties, however, are only a small part of the story. It is the Assad regime which is responsible for the vast majority of refugees and internally displaced persons. Western Syria is the core of its population and it is the fighting there—not with ISIS—that has done most of the human damage. Children that drown as refugees, or die of disease and malnutrition in the desert, suffer at least as much or more than those who die from nerve gas, and the dead have an end date to their suffering. More than half of Syria's population—which was around 22 million when the fighting start and the CIA now estimates totals around 17.1 million—is now displaced or a refugee.

The current entry for Syria in the CIA World Factbook notes just how high the total of human suffering became during the first two years of civil war. That, "Syria's economy continues to deteriorate amid the ongoing conflict that began in 2011, declining by 62% from 2010 to 2014. The government has struggled to address the effects of international sanctions, widespread infrastructure damage, diminished domestic consumption and production, reduced subsidies, and high inflation, which have caused dwindling foreign exchange reserves, rising budget and trade deficits, a decreasing value of the Syrian pound, and falling household purchasing power[...]During 2014, the ongoing conflict and continued unrest and economic decline worsened the humanitarian crisis and elicited a greater need for international assistance, as the number of people in need inside Syria increased from 9.3 million to 12.2 million, and the number of Syrian refugees increased from 2.2 million to more than 3.3 million."

Once again, the figures for the current level of suffering are uncertain, but the UN's Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs (OCHA) reported early in 2017 that the total had become almost unthinkable higher. It estimated that "civilians continue to bear the brunt of a conflict marked by unparalleled suffering, destruction and disregard for human life. 13.5 million people require humanitarian assistance, including 4.6 million people in need trapped in besieged and hard-to-reach areas, where they are exposed to grave protection threats. Over half of the population has been forced from their homes, and many people have been displaced multiple times. Children and youth comprise more than half of the displaced, as well as half of those in need of humanitarian assistance. Parties to the conflict act with impunity, committing violations of international humanitarian and human rights law."

The current human cost of Assad's repression and violence is also only part of this story. The CIA has also estimated that Syria's GDP dropped by 70% between 2010 and 2016, was only \$24.6 billion in 2014 at the official exchange rate, and was only \$55.8 billion in 2015 even in purchasing power parity terms. No one can begin to estimate what it will take to deal with what may well be a deeply divided country, to reduce corruption and misgovernment to workable levels, and to establish any stable pattern of income distribution and reconstruction efforts.

The war has had an immense impact on Syria's future ability to recover and develop. It has also compounded the deep sectarian and ethnic problems that existed long before Syria's political upheavals and war. It is impossible to estimate how much each war will add to the cost of moving towards stable and sustainable governance, development, and security in any of the countries where the United States is now using force—if only because there is no way to determine if, when, or how each war will end. However, working estimates by the IMF and World Bank indicate it would require hundreds of billions of dollars per country to recover and move towards rapid development, if a given war ended in the current year. These are by necessity "guesstimates."

If one only looks at the case of Syria, a World Bank study of Syria noted in late 2016 that, "the destruction of physical infrastructure amounted to US\$75 billion and the UN estimated that investments of US\$150-200 billion will be needed to bring Syrian GDP back to pre-conflict levels." Estimates of these costs by World Vision and Frontier Economics have risen to over \$275 billion today, and indicate that the total could be over \$1 trillion if the civil wars drag on to 2020.

These are critical issues in dealing with Assad. Using poison gas to push him from power may punish him personally, but—like any negotiation that only ends in a ceasefire or some jury-rigged form of government—it ignores just how large and critical Assad's real "butcher's bill" has become. The United States, its allies, and other states need to look at how they help Syrian's address the full impact of the war, reduce extremism and internal violence, and move forward. Aid will be critical as will looking beyond ISIS in ending violent extremism. The lack of U.S. and international action has already made the world an accessory to Assad's actions. Simply condemning him, or pushing him from power in ways that get Syria's suffering out of the headlines, will make us an accessory after the fact.

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