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The Syrian Civil War: A Decade of Conflict

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Density of Organized Violence
in the Middle East since 2000

A heatmap of the Middle East region showing the density of organized violence since 2000. The map uses a color scale from light green (low density) to dark red (high density). The most intense areas, shown in dark red and blue, are concentrated in Syria and Iraq, particularly in the northern and central regions. Other areas of moderate to high density (red) are visible in Lebanon, Jordan, and parts of the Gulf region. The rest of the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the Arabian Peninsula, shows very low density (light green).

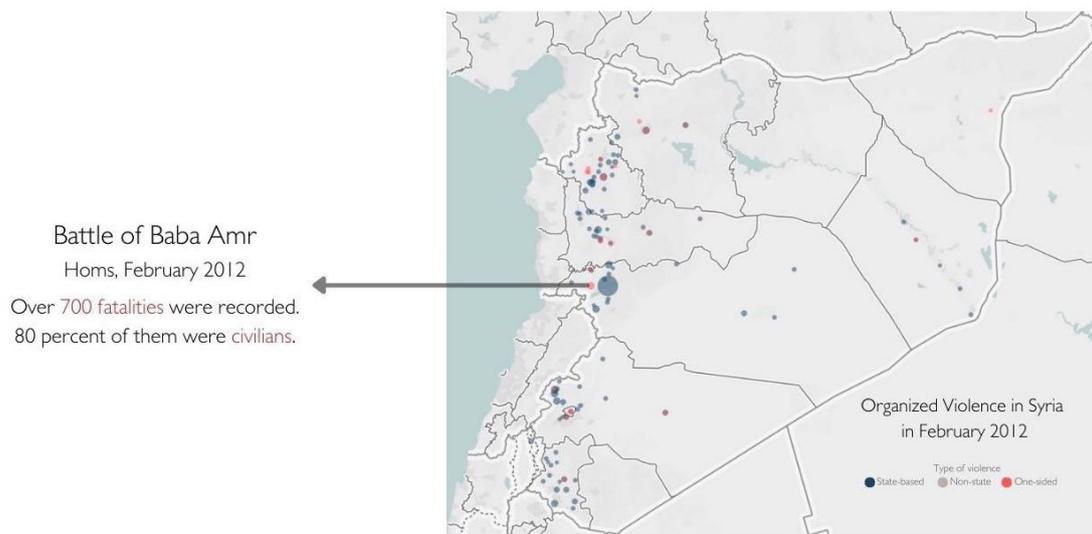
“I’m as old as the revolution,” Kinan said to me in a video call. Kinan is a 10 year-old IDP from Daraa, the uprising’s ground zero. Ten years ago, on the 18th of March 2011, the regime’s security forces shot and killed four demonstrators, which sparked the most intense civil war in the century. Syria’s future changed completely after this day. Kids born during the 10 years long civil war have different understandings of what we consider as common knowledge; “I was told at school that people use planes to travel to places, but I don’t believe them. Whenever I hear a plane coming I know it’s going to bomb, that’s what planes do” said Alwan to an AJ+ reporter. Alwan is also a 10 year-old IDP who lost his mother and home to a regime airstrike in northwest Syria.¹ An entire generation grew up on loss, displacement, bombing, starvation, and misery.

► Conflict background

The domino effect of the Arab Spring phenomenon swept through Syria in 2011, as anti-regime protests starting flaring-up in Daraa, southern Syria. These protests soon spread to other provinces across the country. The regime responded with superficial political concessions and a brutal crackdown relying on its security forces. Armed groups started forming in border areas. The brutality of the regime’s crackdown, Syrians’ lack of experience

in civilian resistance, and foreign support to the newly formed armed groups further undermined the peaceful side of the uprising. Soon after, Syria had turned into a battle-ground between government forces and insurgents. The intensity of the first direct encounter between government forces and insurgents in February 2012 in the battle of Baba Amr, Homs city was a bad omen of the bloodshed to come.

¹ <https://twitter.com/ajplusarabi/status/1369785136309407745>



February 2012 estimates and geolocation data based on UCDP GED 20.1



UCDP data shows that a single battle caused more than 700 fatalities over the course of one month. This battle served as an indicator of the high intensity and urban characteristics of what to come. One year after the initial protests in 2011, the country had already descended into a full-blown civil war. The later intervention of foreign actors, the involvement of jihadist groups, and the involved actors' disregard to civilian loss made the past ten years the worst decade in Syria's modern history.

► The conflict in numbers

This year marks the tenth anniversary of the ongoing Syrian civil war. Ten years of bloody and devastating war in Syria have killed at least **365 000** people, including more than **80 000** civilians. Syria has witnessed the bloodiest conflict of the 21st century, with many parties and supporting regional and international players involved in the bloodshed. The war caused the largest humanitarian tragedy since the Second World War^{2,3}. More than half of the Syrian population was displaced from their homes, either within Syria or as refugees outside the country^{4,5}. More than six million people are refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Europe or other countries⁶. UCDP data counted the death of more than **125 000** government forces, both regular forces and pro-government militias. This number also includes secondary supporting actors like Iranian militias and Hezbollah.

Additionally, at least **89 000** insurgent fighters were killed battling government forces, whereas another **35 000** were killed in clashes between the different rebel groups. At least tens of thousands of Syrians have been forcibly disappeared, detained, abducted or gone missing at the hands of the government, armed opposition groups and terror groups operating in Syria since the outbreak of conflict in 2011^{7,8}.

7 Syria: the disappeared. (2021, March 11). OHCHR. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/Syria-the-disappeared.aspx>

8 At Least 98,000 Forcibly Disappeared Persons in Syria Since March 2011. (2019, September 1). SNHR. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/least-98000-forcibly-disappeared-persons-syria-march-2011>

2 Syria Observatory for Human Rights Syrian Revolution nine years on: 586 100 persons killed and millions of Syrians displaced and injured. <https://www.syriaohr.com/en/157193/> Date: March 15, 2020

3 UNHCR. (2016). Syria conflict at 5 years: The biggest refugee and displacement crisis of our time demands a huge surge in solidarity.

4 Trends, G. (2019). Forced Displacement in 2015. UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency, Switzerland.

5 What you need to know about the Syria crisis. (2021, March 9). DRC. <https://drc.ngo/it-matters/feature-stories/2021/3/the-syria-crisis/>

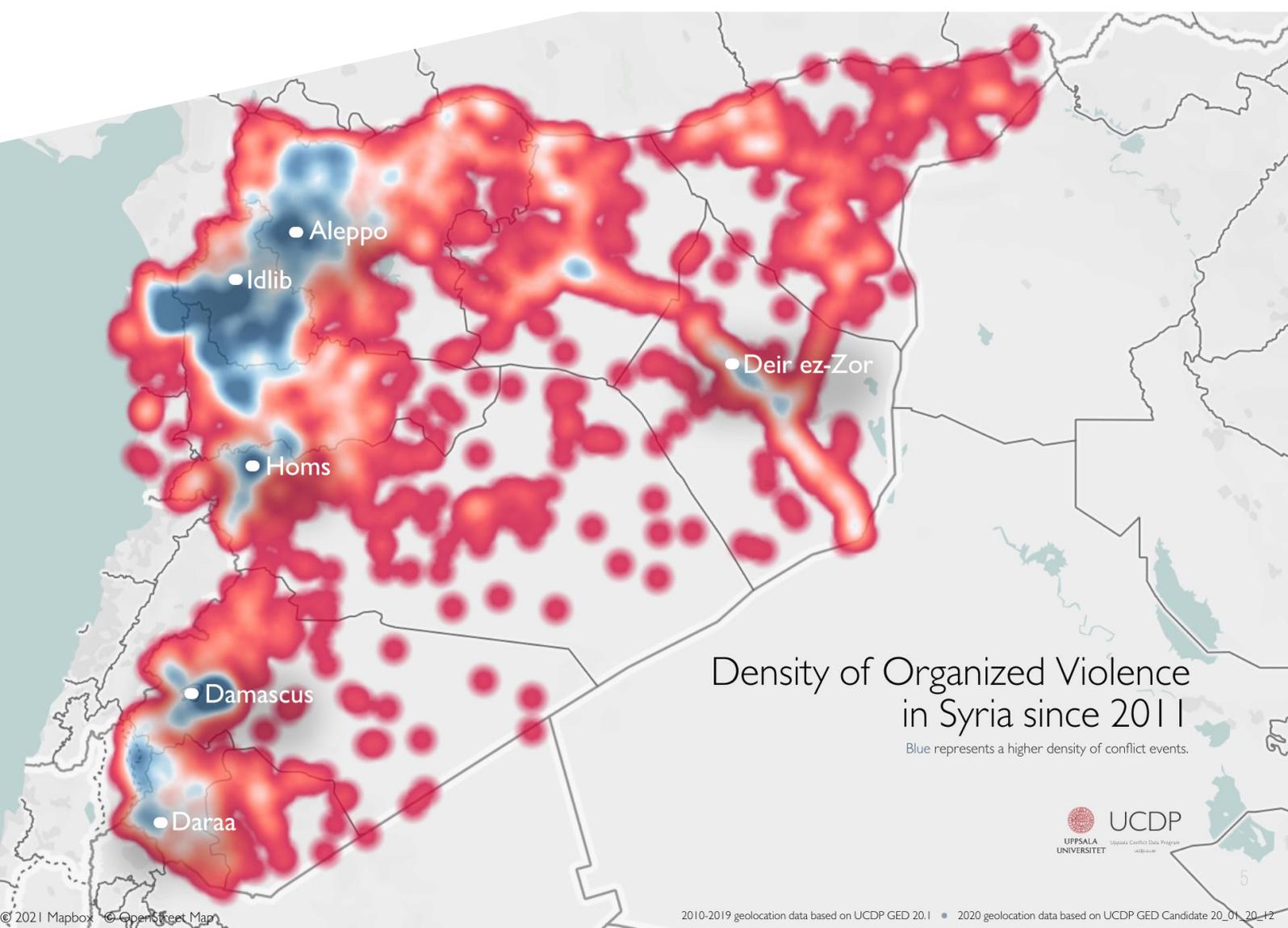
6 Syria Refugee Crisis Explained. (2021, February 5). UNHCR. <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/>

► Battle intensity

The Syrian civil war is the deadliest conflict of the 21st century. One of the main reasons behind it being such a deadly conflict is that the majority of the fighting took place in densely populated areas. The fact that urban warfare was a dominant theme in the Syrian civil war has made it more brutal for combatants and civilians alike.

UCDP data shows that the bulk of the battles happened in highly dense areas like Rif Dimashq and Aleppo. The following map highlights the concentration of the organized violence in Syria since 2011.

The blue colour indicates a high concentration of conflict events which as the map shows are focused in urban centres such as Rif Dimashq, Homs, Hama, Idlib, and Aleppo.



► International intervention

Syria's strategic location and complex civil war has drawn regional and international powers into the conflict since 2011. Syria has four armies on its soil. Russia and Iran supporting the Syrian government, USA supporting the SDF, and Turkey supporting insurgents. External powers have shifted their goals throughout the civil war. Turkey and the USA supported insurgents at the beginning of the conflict to overthrow the Syrian government, while Iran and Russia supported the Syrian government to help it maintain in power and regain ground. As the conflict passes a decade, we find ourselves with the same foreign powers, but with different goals in mind. Iran is using Syria to spread its influence and strengthen its position against Israel through its proxies, while Russia is trying to conciliate power from Turkey, USA, and oftentimes Iran. The USA focuses its efforts into disturbing Iranian and Russian influence in eastern Syria and deny the Syrian government access to oil wells, and Turkey is trying to keep the last insurgent stronghold, stop the Kurdish-dominated SDF from consolidating power in the north, and using Turkish-backed insurgents as its proxies.

► Conclusion

Currently, Syria is a country divided between the intervening nations and their clients inside Syria. The main reason behind this stalemate is not that the conflicting parties have had enough of destruction, but rather, the intervening countries' ongoing interests and agreements. The intervening countries' investment in avoiding any risk of military confrontation that will most definitely escalate beyond Syria's borders has created this stalemate and the clear divisions in territorial control in Syria. The conflict will most probably continue in this frozen state for the foreseeable future, including occasional outbursts.

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The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) is the world's main provider of data on organized violence and the oldest ongoing data collection project for civil war, with a history of almost 40 years. Its definition of armed conflict has become the global standard of how conflicts are systematically defined and studied.

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