



Language

The popular demonstrations that began in Syria in March 2011 were initially consciously peaceful and were also both persistent and brave in the face of the immediately brutal response of the Assad regime. Assad's speech to the Syrian parliament in which he refused to consider any possible reforms in response to the demonstrations, and the decision by some sections of the regular army to defect to support the protesters, meant however that by 2012 civil resistance was overtaken by a civil war. Assad managed to maintain support from key Muslim minorities and Christians, who had prospered under the regime, as well as from urban elites who feared the destabilizing effects of an uprising. He also enjoyed active military support from Iran and Hezbollah fighters. The armed resistance was over time increasingly dominated by extremist Sunni groups including Al Qaeda (Assad had deliberately released members of these groups from prison in 2011), and later included Islamic State. This gave a degree of credibility to Assad's claim that the opposition was entirely composed of these terrorist Islamist groups, and by 2017, after the fall of Aleppo, it had become largely true. The moderate opposition to Assad sought, help from the US and European governments, and did in the early years get political backing for their goals. But UN sponsored peace talks in Geneva broke down in early 2014.

President Obama decided not to intervene militarily after there was evidence in August 2013 that the regime had used chemical weapons against civilians in rebel areas, although he had earlier cited use of such weapons as a 'red line'. He was partly influenced by a vote in the British Parliament against military action over this issue. However, western forces did later use air strikes against IS in Syria as well as Iraq. Vladimir Putin, who had supported Assad at the UN, decided in 2015 to commit Russian military forces to help Assad win, and to extend Russian influence in the Middle East. Turkey also became militarily involved in Syrian territory in October 2019, after President Trump decided to withdraw US troops from Kurdish areas - despite the role of Kurdish fighters (including women) in defeating the threat from ISIS. The Turkish government, involved in a long struggle with Kurds inside Turkey, seized the opportunity to undermine the political and military role Kurds had assumed by creating the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria - better known as Rojava. Turkish troops not only attacked and occupied parts of Kurdish territory (Russian troops controlled other parts), but also created a large buffer zone by its border with the aim of expelling Kurds from it.

The scale of armed force used in Syria since 2012 has destroyed numerous homes, schools and hospitals, towns and cities, most notably the ancient city of Aleppo, and after 10 years of war driven an estimated 12 million out of their homes and millions to seek refuge in neighbouring countries (many in Turkey) or in Europe. Those who remained in rebel territory were vulnerable to numerous forms of military attack, hunger and illness, and sometimes subjected to draconian political control - as in areas held by ISIS. Both the Assad regime and Russian forces appear to have been responsible for bombing of civilians, but journalists have also found evidence of the damage done to non-combatants by western bombing against ISIS.

The scope for nonviolent forms of resistance has therefore been severely limited. However, in the early years in the areas held by the resistance there was an upsurge in communal activism, artistic creativity and constructive attempts to promote welfare and education, and assert new freedoms such as women's rights. Active civil resistance against both the Assad regime and ISIS has partly taken the form of citizen journalism (getting news to the outside world). The other major role for peaceful activists in rebel held areas has been to organize medical and other aid to Syrians suffering the worst effects of the war. Informing the outside world and saving victims of military attacks have been combined by the organization the White Helmets, who film themselves rescuing those injured and have been well reported in the west. They have been fiercely attacked by both the Assad regime and the Russian government for allegedly faking their filmed evidence, or for links with an extremist group fighting in Syria (the Al-Nusra Front), or for acting on behalf of western governments - criticisms which some in western countries have endorsed. The role of communal initiative and peaceful resistance in Syria since 2012, including the White Helmets, and resistance to ISIS, are covered in some references below. (There are also some references to nonviolent resistance to ISIS under [Vol.1.A.1.b](#). [1])



This supplement on Syria provides a time line and other helpful contextual information about the complex developments in Syria from 2011-15, as well as an analysis of the role of civic activism in rebel held territory. The issue includes a discussion of artistic creativity since 2011, stories of individual journalists opposing Assad or ISIS, of a doctor treating victims of chemical attack, a teacher under ISIS, and an article on the White Helmets.

See also: Abbas, Omar, 'Dr Jalal Nofal: Connecting Relief Work and Civil Activism in Syria', *War Resisters' International*, 11 Nov, 2016

<https://wri-irg.org/en/story/2016/dr-jalal-nofal-connecting-relief-work-and-civil-activism-syria> [3]

An account of the leftist political background of Dr Nofal, his nonviolent resistance (including arrests and imprisonment), and his medical initiatives as a psychiatrist in Damascus from 2011-14. He was smuggled out of Syria early in 2015, but continued from a border town in Turkey to broadcast, to offer training for social workers and support for refugees, and also to help social workers inside Syria.

Bartkowsky, Maciej ; Kahf, Mohja, [Civil Resistance: A Tale of Two Struggles](#) [4], Part 1 and 2, Open Democracy, 23/09/2013,

The articles discuss the 'tragedy' of nonviolent resistance being overtaken by armed resistance and the tendency of the nonviolent activism to be obscured, and outline the role of nonviolent resistance in Syria so far.

Hinnenbusch, Raymond ; Imady, Omar, [The Syrian Uprising: Domestic Origins and Early Trajectory](#) [5], London, Routledge, 2018, pp. 358

Scholarly, interdisciplinary analysis of the Assad regime and of the first two years of the uprising. The book explores the nature of the uprising, reasons for the lack of success, and why it turned into an increasingly sectarian civil war.

See also: Hinnenbusch, Raymond, Omar Imady and Tina Zintl, 'Civil Resistance in the Syrian Uprising: From Peaceful Protest to Sectarian Civil War', in Adam Roberts, Michael J. Willis, Rory McCarthy and Timothy Garton Ash, eds. *Civil Resistance in the Arab Spring* (E.V.B.a.), pp. 223-47.

An overview with a focus on the role, possibilities and limitations of civil resistance in the specific context of the Assad regime, and the realities of the civil war from 2012 and the rise of ISIS.

Knapp, Michael ; Ayboga, Ercan, [Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan](#) [6], London, Pluto Press, 2016, pp. 320

A detailed history and sympathetic analysis of the development of a new kind of politics in the autonomous administration created rebel held territory in northern Kurdistan in Syria. Rojava's ideology (a reaction against the previous Marxist-Leninist beliefs of the Kurdish PKK) rejects centralized state control and emphasizes local communal organizing and promotion of ecological and feminist goals. Their armed groups, which include women's units, played a major role in opposing ISIS.

See also: Dirik, Dilar, 'Unbowed' *New Internationalist*, July/August 2020, pp.22-4.

The author notes the 'remarkable progress' made by the Autonomous Administration in Northern and Eastern Syria since July 2012 in promoting women's rights in all spheres. Turkish troops and their proxies occupied parts of Rojava - Afrin in the north in 2018 and the area bordering Turkey in 2019 - expelling hundreds of thousands of Kurds, shutting down all women's organizations and allowing armed groups to terrorize women. Nevertheless, women were continuing to organize more informally and were committed to resist the permanent extinction of their basic rights, and in northern Syria had held protests and rallies.

Maher, Shiraz, [Between Twin Barbarisms](#) [7], New Statesman, 2017, pp. 25-27



A detailed analysis of how Al Qaeda under various organizational guises have been taking over the opposition to Assad and marginalized the moderates, whilst claiming to pursue a 'middle path'. The author also warns that ISIS has not been wholly defeated.

Starr, Stephen, [Revolt in Syria: Eyewitness to the Uprising](#) [8], London , Hurst, 2015, pp. 178 pb

In this book, which was well reviewed, Starr - an Irish journalist - provides a detailed account of the complex nature of Syrian society with its many minorities and why some supported Assad. He had worked in Syria since 2007 and was able to send reports from inside the country to a range of respected US and UK newspapers during the nonviolent uprising and the subsequent civil war. His account is based partly on interviews with a wide range of people with diverse allegiances and viewpoints.

Stephan, Maria, [Support for Nonviolent Fighters Key to Ending War](#) [9], Waging Nonviolence, 21/04/2017,

Urges external support for groups trying to help people devastated by war and also to create the organizational basis for a better future. Stephan notes the role of women-led 'peace circles' publicizing atrocities, promoting education and psychiatric help for refugee children, and planning for the future.

See also: Al Shami, Leila, 'Syria: Women Continue Resistance against Fascism, Imperialism and Patriarchy', *Open Democracy*, 5 January 2017.

Describes a young woman taking risks to communicate with the outside world before the fall of Aleppo, and then discusses the wider role of women in the opposition.

There are also a number of documentary films on aspects of resistance and constructive action inside Syria:

"Islamic State's" Most Wanted', BBC World Service, July 2016 (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03qzk9g> [10])

An account of citizen journalists in Raqaa (capital of the IS Syrian caliphate) taking appalling risks (and sometime suffering death and attacks on their families) to send online reports to the outside world. Hussam Eesa, who managed to escape Raqaa when he knew arrest was imminent in 2014, is interviewed for the programme.

'Syria's Disappeared: The Case against Assad', Channel 4, March 2017
(<https://www.channel4.com/news/syrias-disappeared> [11])

Reveals how prisoners in one of Assad's prisons smuggled out lists of names of those detained. They were written in blood on scraps of material, which any prisoner who was released could take out with him. The story is told by Mansour al-Omari, a human rights activist jailed in February 2012, who eventually managed to attain asylum in Sweden.

'The White Helmets', Netflix documentary, February 2017 (upon subscription)

A film about the White Helmets (Syrian Civil Defence), who had been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize, and its 3,000 members across Syria. The documentary received an Oscar nomination and fueled controversy.

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[1] <https://civilresistance.info/section/introduction-nonviolent-action/1-theory-methods-and-examples/1b-strategic-theory-dynamics> [2] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2015/big-story-syria> [3] <https://wri-irg.org/en/story/2016/dr-jalal-nofal-connecting-relief-work-and-civil-activism-syria> [4] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2013/civil-resistance-tale-two-struggles> [5] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2018/syrian-uprising-domestic-origins-and-early-trajectory> [6] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2016/revolution-rojava-democratic-autonomy-and-womens-liberation-syrian-kurdistan> [7] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2017/between-twin-barbarisms> [8] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2015/revolt-syria-eyewitness-uprising> [9] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2017/support-nonviolent-fighters-key-ending-war> [10] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03qzk9g> [11] <https://www.channel4.com/news/syrias-disappeared>