



# Syria, ten years later

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## Introduction

Armadilla is a social cooperative which is primarily committed to international cooperation: ([www.armadilla.coop](http://www.armadilla.coop)).

It also carries out training and information activities on the themes of the 2030 agenda, proposed by the United Nations, for the defence of human rights and for the achievement of the 17 objectives for sustainable human [development: https://www.unric.org/it/agenda-2030](https://www.unric.org/it/agenda-2030) .

In this context, these Notebooks are intended to help disseminate among students and the public to which Armadilla is addressed, information, critical analysis, possible answers to the priority problems faced. The collection of all notebooks from 2015 to today can be found in: <http://armadilla.coop/quaderni/> .

**In this Notebook we present a reflection on the situation in Syria and the work of Armadilla in recent years.**

The war in Syria, since 2011, has claimed more than 500,000 lives and about half of the population has been forced to leave their homes to escape war, violence, and destruction. **Overall, it is estimated that 11.1 of the 18 million Syrians currently need humanitarian assistance. Of these, 4.7 million people have acute needs, 6.1 million are displaced, 5.6 million** have taken refuge in neighbouring countries with limited prospects of returning to the country, due to the convergence of factors that increase their vulnerability such as: the persistence of hostilities, the loss of goods and livelihoods, and limited access to basic goods and services. Basic infrastructure - schools, water supply systems, sanitary facilities, and housing - has been severely damaged and/or contaminated by explosive devices and has never been repaired. In areas of the country where hostilities persist (north-west, north-east, south), surviving remains a daily struggle due to limited access to basic services and livelihood opportunities, growing financial difficulties and a lack of capacity to cope with ever-increasing problems. In 2019, more than 1.8 million displacements were recorded. About 90% of the population lives below the poverty line. The process of returning Syrians who are now abroad was discussed at an international conference held on 11 and 12 November in Damascus on the initiative of Russia.

The United Nations Organization took part in the event as an 'observer', while the European Union, the United States and Turkey did not take part. At the table, in addition to Russia, Iran, China and delegations from countries that have recently restored, formally or in fact, relations with Damascus after years of tension, such as the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Lebanon, took part.

The European Union, in a statement, announced its position: "the European Union - we read in the text - is of the opinion that the priority is currently a genuine action to create the conditions for a safe, voluntary, dignified and sustainable return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their areas of origin, in line with international law and the parameters of protection for the return of refugees to Syria". According to the European Union, the Damascus Conference is considered "premature".

According to EU officials, "although the return **decision must always be individual, conditions within Syria currently do not lend themselves** to the promotion of voluntary returns on a large scale, in conditions of security and dignity in line with international law."

The Bishop of the Maronites of Aleppo, Monsignor Joseph Tobji, published his heartfelt appeal: "The situation of internally displaced persons is very critical. Most have returned to the cities, to their villages but without houses, streets, and palaces and this is the most difficult thing even if the strength of the family makes up for the shortcomings and many are arranging and welcoming each other, waiting for the reconstruction that also depends a lot on the sanctions in force. People in Aleppo are starving. Because of the sanctions, because of the capital that has fled abroad, because of the lack of work here the situation - I can say for sure - **is worse than we were under the bombs. Now we are much worse off than when we were under the bombs. So, this is the war now that continues stronger and kills the whole population.** That is why, since the beginning of the war, we have been calling for sanctions not to be applied, because here it is the people who are suffering. Everything is needed, starting with health, medicines, food, electricity, water that is still lacking in different parts of the country. It is a very difficult life to live. That is why refugees, when they see this situation, do not feel encouraged to return.

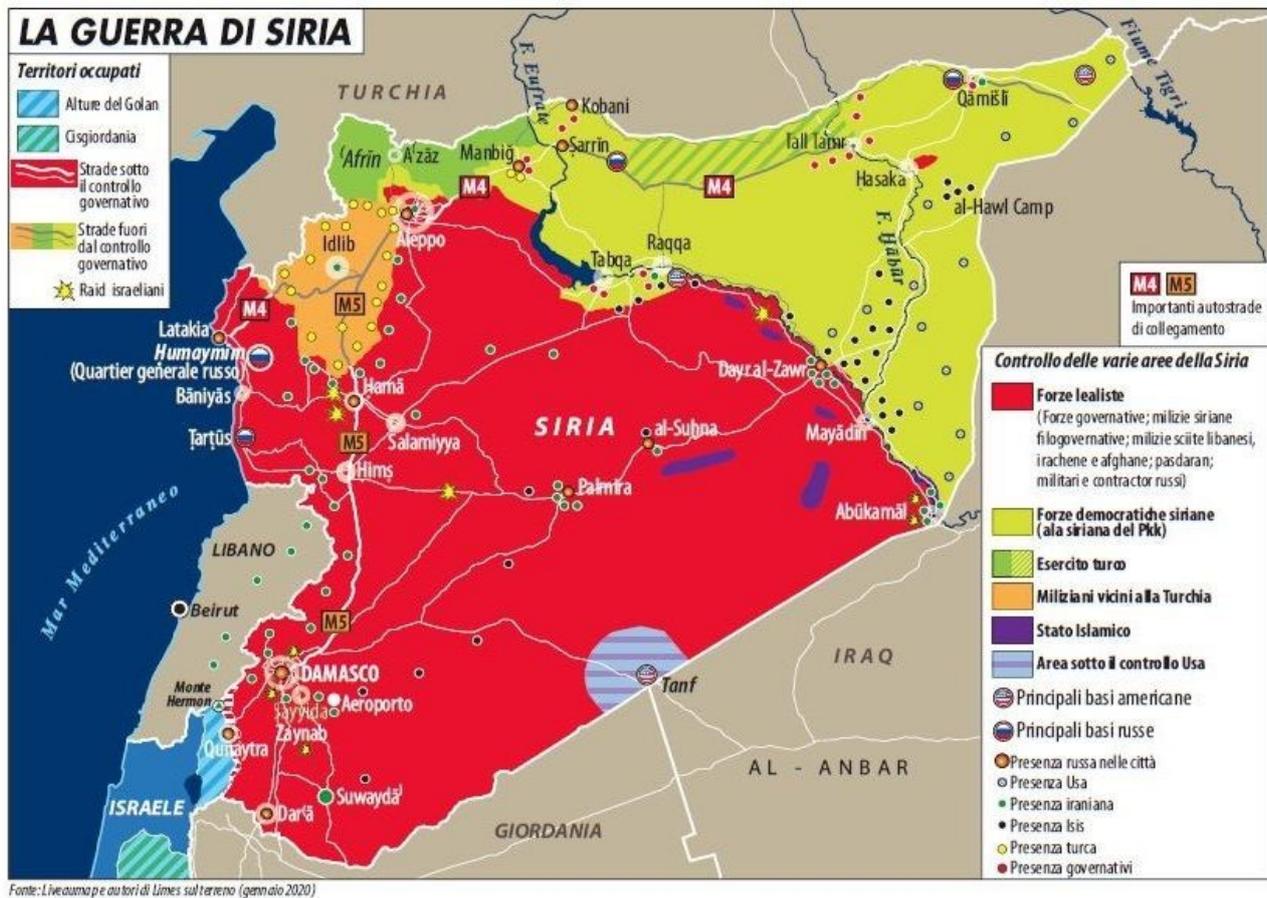
From the end of July until mid-August the Covid 19 pandemic caused many victims then stopped and now you can no longer feel so much. There are few deaths, but if it had continued as before, half the population would have disappeared. The hope for the Syrian people and for the refugees who would like to return and still cannot do so is that the war will end, that there will be peace, that sanctions will be lifted, and I say to the refugees: 'This is your home, the roots are here', I know that most refugees are not happy with where they are and want to go home...'

**Even in Damascus the situation is no better.** Petrol is scarce and there are miles of queues at the gas stations. People are exhausted. Now that winter is coming, we already know that there will be a diesel emergency for heating. The power comes and goes. Bread rations, distributed directly by the state, have also been reduced. **And to aggravate the situation is the problem that internally displaced persons living near the capital Damascus are not considered a priority by the international community as they are supposed to be assisted by the local government. That he does not have the conditions and the chance.** To tell the living conditions of the Syrians is Father Bahjat Karakach, guardian of the Franciscan convent of Bab Thouma in Damascus. "With the sanctions imposed, the country is unable to start economically: the Syrian lira has lost its value and prices are very high. People don't see a horizon and we are in a worse state of emergency than there was during the bombings," says the cleric, whose words are reported on the Custody's website.

In addition, **"the Lebanese crisis has had a major impact on Syria because many Syrians work in Lebanon and so today there are those who can no longer help their families. All aid also passed through Lebanon, but now Lebanon is on its knees."** "Today everything is needed, says Father Bahjat Karakach, but above all it is important that we continue to talk about Syria. People often forget about the Syrian issue or the news is out of hand. We need an international community working for the reintegration of Syria into the world. How can we give hope if the country cannot be rebuilt?"

The work coordinated by the UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen resumed in Geneva on 1 December 2020, to form the Constitutional Committee that should propose a process of peace and institutional reforms in the country. We start from UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which provides for an end to the fighting, the role of the United Nations in involving all parties to the conflict at the negotiating table, the commitment to support the sovereignty, independence, unity, and territorial integrity of the Syrian

Republic; the establishment of a national transitional system; the start of the process of drawing up a new Constitution and holding free elections under the supervision of the United Nations.



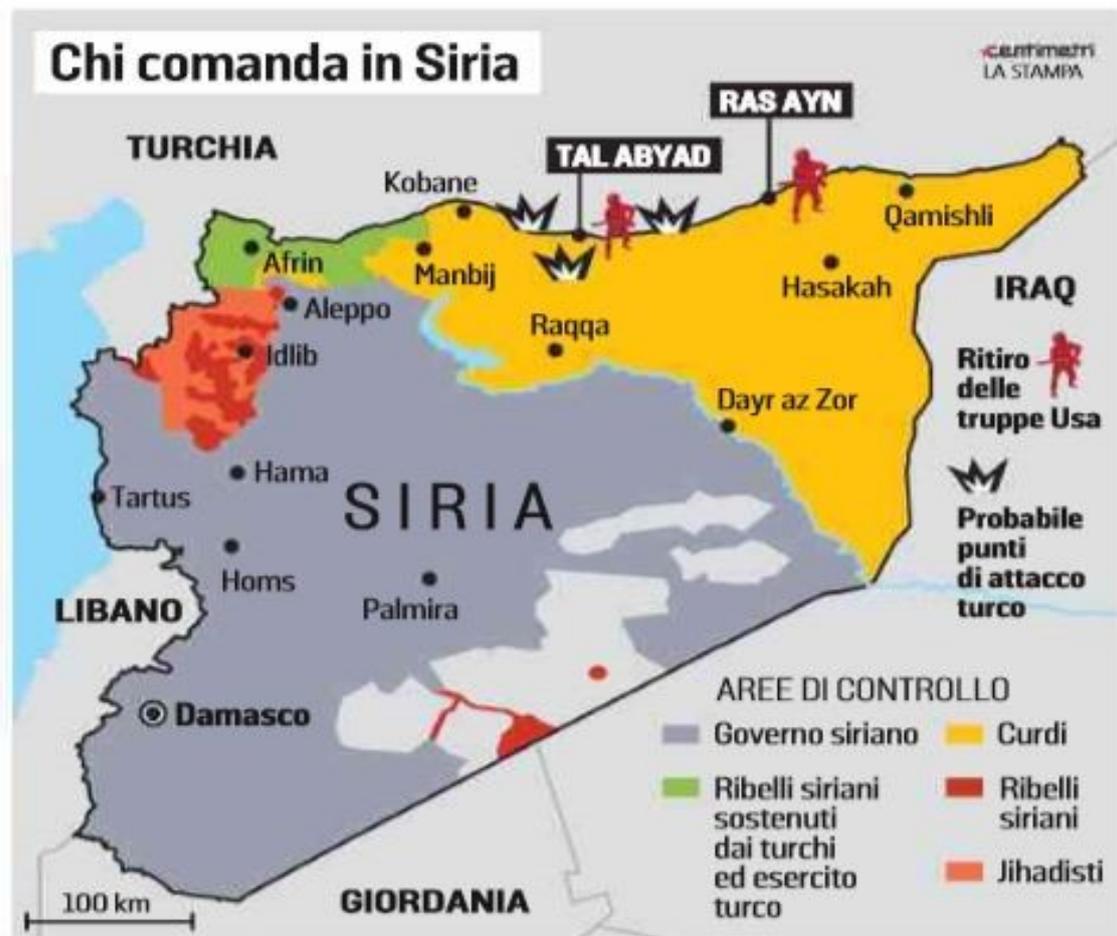
## 1. Analysis of the current economic situation

The war crisis that has lasted for almost ten years, the loss of assets, the scarcity of financial investments in the country, the pressures resulting from the sanctions regime are all factors that contribute to the loss of livelihoods, the reduction of purchasing power and a constantly deteriorating economic situation. This is the looming economic crisis exacerbated by the crisis in neighbouring Lebanon and the Covid-19 emergency. Over the past 12 months, the Syrian lira has devalued by 400% on the unofficial market, reaching the lowest point of 3,120 lire per 1 dollar (it recently recovered slightly, settling around 2,400 Syrian lire), forcing the Central Bank to adjust the official exchange rate from 704 to 1,256 Syrian lire for 1 dollar and 1,400 for 1 euro. **Food prices have risen by more than 130%, more than 9 million people are food insecure, with an increase of 1.4 million in the last six months, while those suffering from severe food insecurity have doubled from around 570,000 to more than a million.** The ongoing prevention measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic have disrupted various services in the different sectors of humanitarian intervention, creating new needs and increasing the vulnerabilities of the already exhausted population. **Who classifies Syria as high risk of spreading COVID-19. From the first case announced on 22 March to 30 November 2020, there are 7,797 confirmed cases by who throughout the country, 413 deaths.** The surveillance and testing capacity is insufficient, and infections are constantly increasing, with a potentially catastrophic impact on the population that has suffered for 9 years the crisis in the country. The health system throughout Syria is significantly weakened. Covid-19 prevention measures taken by the authorities have had a direct impact on the provision of essential services, including education and

protection services. Schools and financial institutions, legal and civil documentation services have been closed, in whole or in part, for at least two months. The loss of production during seasonal agricultural activities and the impact on the livestock market may limit the availability of food in the coming months. **As a result, the nutritional status of the population is expected to deteriorate further, especially for vulnerable groups - displaced persons and people with limited access to health and food care.**

The objectives of the Humanitarian Response Plan for Syria (HRP) are as follows:

- 1) To provide life-saving humanitarian assistance of the earliest emergency to the most vulnerable Syrian population, especially those living in areas with a high intensity of needs;
- 2) Improve the prevention and mitigation of risks related to the protection of protection and respond to protection needs through the promotion of international law, human rights and international humanitarian law;
- 3) Increasing resilience and access to services: The response under this objective aims to increase resilience by improving opportunities by 11 NB: Palestinian refugees with the vulnerabilities mentioned deserve special attention, given the acuteness of their needs.



## 2. Evolution of the conflict

The UN-mediated inter-Syrian talks to change the country's constitution, which has been at war for ten years, were resumed on December 1, 2020, in Geneva, Switzerland. The meeting of the Syrian Constitutional Committee is chaired by Geir Pedersen, the UN Special Envoy for Syria. The committee

consists of three different delegations, comprising "one governmental and one opposition, each of which is divided into a political component and one of civil society". The Coronavirus pandemic has forced, due to the restrictive measures adopted, many members of delegations will not be present on the spot, so they will connect via the Internet to the Geneva meeting. "This is the fourth round of talks after the first three held in Geneva and in a virtual way starting in autumn 2019. On the eve of this new meeting, Pedersen said he was "optimistic" that the discussion between the parties could move forward constructively."

The High Representative of the European Union for Foreign and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, said that "the time has come to unblock the Geneva talks to seek a political solution to the war in Syria."

EU sanctions are not aimed at the civilian population but are intended for those who oppress the Syrian people, who use chemical weapons and who bomb schools and hospitals. We will continue to respond to humanitarian needs and call for a political solution. The time has come to unblock the Geneva talks and to seek a political solution and to bring about a truly inclusive peace in Syria," concluded Borrell.

**It is important to know the positions that the various international players have taken in the Syrian conflict and on this we report a summary of the Senate document, edited by Angela Mattiello, entitled "Syria: after 9 years of conflict at what point are we?"**

[www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/01149283.pdf](http://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/01149283.pdf)

Russia in September 2015 announced its decision to intervene militarily, deploying its forces on the battlefield and launching a massive military campaign. This presence on the ground has had a decisive impact on regional balances: it has avoided the defeat of Assad's army and reversed the balance of forces, especially following the surrender of Aleppo in December 2016 negotiated by Russia and Turkey, without the involvement of western chancelleries.

Since then, Russia has been able to exploit the weakening of the rebels and has taken on a key role in the development of the conflict, also playing the role of the main mediator of political negotiation, agreeing the cessation of hostilities between the Syrian government and the main armed opposition groups in December 2016 and attempting to ensure that they are maintained through the Astana talks.

**Today, Russia's** position can be summarised in four points that Mr Lavrov has set out very clearly:

- 1) the war is over and there is no longer any possibility of military action on the ground. Very clear message for President Bashar.
- 2) The international community has finally convinced itself that President Bashar is no longer being discussed and the Western option "never at the negotiating table with Him" has been cancelled.
- 3) Work towards a rapid definition of a constitutional process defining political recognition and parliamentary representation to opposition groups except for Muslim brothers who are out of any hypothesis (message for Turkey).
- 4) Si must begin to talk about institutional, economic, and infrastructural reconstruction to send a signal to the West of normalization and lifting of sanctions (at least eu sanctions) pending the post-Trump referendum.

**The Iranian position:**

- 1) The war is over and there is no longer any possibility of military action on the ground. Very clear message for President Bashar (shared strategy with Russia).
- 2) Removal of Iranian troops from Syrian territory with definition of points of contact with the territory (Pasdaran and Hezbollah).

- 3) Safeguard investment in economic and military terms in defence of possible Turkish movements and the Iraqi border.
- 4) Exhaust and put an end to the "Isis resistance" in Idlib. I would like to make it clear to Turkey.

Since the summer of 2016, Turkey has conducted three military interventions in northern Syria (Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch and Peace Spring), not only to prevent the formation of a Kurdish territorial band controlled by the People's Protection Units (YPG) but also to facilitate the return to areas occupied by Turkish forces of Syrian refugees in Turkey. This was one of the stated objectives of the last operation, Source of Peace (October 2019), to bring back one million refugees to northern Syria.

This is a complex operation, with the result far from obvious in the light of the resistance of many to go to areas that are still unstable and different from those of origin, and which would further destabilise the demographic configuration of these Kurdish-majority areas. As you know, Kurdish soldiers of the YPG (People's Protection Units) have long been fought by the Turks because they are accused of being allies of the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers' Party in Turkey, considered by Ankara to be a "terrorist". At the same time, they were the West's best allies against Daesh in Syria and were the protagonists of some of the toughest defeats inflicted on the ground by jihadists, including the liberation of Raqqa and Mosul. With the fall of Afrin on 17 March 2018, Ankara took control of both sides of almost half (400 km out of 911) of the Turkish-Syrian border.

Until October 2019, Syria was split into two distinct areas, separated by the Euphrates River. The West was almost entirely under the control of Damascus and its allies, except for Idlib province, where the main remaining rebel groups, including several jihadist groups, are still holed up today. In addition, a strip of territory along the border with Turkey was occupied by Ankara troops and some rebel groups in its orbit. Eastern Syria, on the other hand, remained completely outside Damascus' control. Kurdish forces, supported by American troops, were in power here. On October 6, 2019, President Donald Trump announced a partial disengagement of the American contingent in eastern Syria. Within hours, U.S. troops withdrew from the border area on the border with Turkey, focusing further south. In the border area, therefore, only the Kurdish-Arab Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) remained. The American move was immediately interpreted by Ankara as a green light to launch a new military intervention in the country.

#### **Turkish position today:**

With the 2018 campaigns and with the operation (called "Source of Peace"), launched on October 9, 2019: after the American withdrawal, Turkey secured northeast Syria as a dam for Kurdish autonomy. The Syrian Government no longer regards this territory as part of the Syrian Administration.

On 5 March 2020, a new agreement was concluded in Moscow between Russian President Putin and Turkish President Erdogan for a cessation of hostilities in the Idlib area, which is expected to extend along the line drawn by the M4 road, a key artery linking Aleppo to the coast, and which will be patrolled jointly by Turkish and Russian militaries (as is the case along the borders of the territories that Turkey occupied during the last military operation in northeast Syria).

**The European Union has from the beginning supported the need to end the conflict in Syria through a political solution more than military, while supporting the efforts of the Global Coalition against Daesh, and thus reaffirming its full support for the UN-led negotiation process in Geneva and the search for an inclusive political agreement in line with Resolution 2254 and the 2012 Geneva Communiqué.**

The EU has long conditioned its willingness to support the reconstruction of Syria to the concrete start of an inclusive and genuine all-encompassing political transition (*No reconstruction without transition*). However,

Assad's government has strengthened with military victories to the point that Assad's departure from power is no longer on the agenda in the short term. The EU continues to support a credible political solution in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and the Geneva Communiqué.

In addition to diplomatic efforts, the EU plays a leading role as a major donor in the delivery of humanitarian aid. Since 2011, more than €17 billion has been allocated to Syria. In addition, since the beginning of the crisis, the EU has taken several restrictive measures against the Syrian regime and entities associated with terrorism. Current EU sanctions against Syria also include an oil embargo, restrictions on certain investments, the freezing of Syrian central bank assets held in the EU and restrictions on the export of equipment and technology that could be used for internal repression, as well as equipment and technology for monitoring or intercepting telephone or online communications.

Now we need a reflection: the EU has spent almost 17 billion euros to support humanitarian aid and at the same time economic sanctions that "have definitely brought the country to its knees. After 10 years this combination is not a winner but rather a loser. More and more, the cost of war is being paid by the last, by the abandoned population. Before the war, about 3.5 million people lived in the Damascus and Rural Damascus areas. Since the beginning of the war and to date the population of the same area has reached almost 10 million and they are internally displaced.

The EU does not intervene in this area considering these desperate pro-government. The contradiction between the strategic principle (very sterile and dated 2012) and the reality is enormous: In 2018 among the 20 countries exporting goods and equipment to Syria in the private sector, were five European countries: Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and Romania. In 2019 with the "Caesar act" sanctions, the map of Western importing countries changes radically. As the US disappears from the list, France hugely loses its share by scoring a - 51%. The other four European countries increase their share: Germany 13%, Italy 23.4%, Romania 6.6%, and Spain 6.6% (source: Economy Today). The presence of a Diplomat (as Chargé d'Affari) finally begins to represent an all-Italian added value and visibility (albeit behind the EU shield). The MAECI through the AICS tool is also operational in the country in the EU out-target area and this strategic choice is highly appreciated by the Syrian population.

