

## **CHAPTER II**

### **THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR AND US-SYRIAN POLITICAL RELATIONS**

In this chapter discusses the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, some causes, factors, and explanations of developments in the Syrian civil war from 2011 until the United States decided to intervene in the war. This chapter also explains the regime of Bashar Al-Assad until he failed to properly run the regime and opposed by civilians. Moreover, this chapter explains the pre-war relations between the U.S. and Syria, and when the war took place before Barack Obama decided to intervene directly to Syria.

#### **A. REGIME OF BASHAR AL-ASSAD**

Bashar Al-Assad was born on September 11, 1965, in Damascus, Syria. Assad was president in Syria from 2000 who succeeded his father, Hafiz Al-Assad, who ruled Syria since 1971. On June 18, Assad was originally appointed as Secretary General of the ruling Ba'th Party, but two days later the party congress nominated him as a presidential candidate, and the national legislature approved the nomination which reduced the minimum age for the president from 40 to 34 years, and at that time Assad was 34 years old. Bashar al-Assad was officially inaugurated on July 17, 2000, for a term of 7 years.

At first, Syrians doubted the position of president from father to son, but the figure of Bashar Al-Assad had a positive impact in terms of his education, both in Syria and abroad. In his inaugural address, Assad reiterated his commitment to economic liberalization and promised to undertake a number of political reforms, but he rejected Western-style democracy as an appropriate model for Syrian politics

so that there might be a deviation from what had happened to become the status quo: an authoritarian state. The initial hope of Syrians was that his presidency would usher in an era of democratic reform and economic revival.

Assad said that he would protect the Ba'th Party by rejecting policies that might threaten the Ba'th Party's dominance, but he eased a few government restrictions on freedom of expression and the press and released several hundred political prisoners. The early Assad movement contributed to a brief period of relative openness called the "Damascus Spring", where a forum for public political discussion emerged and calls for political reform were tolerated. However, within a few months, the Assad regime has changed direction using threats and arrests to quell pro-reform activism. After that, Assad stressed that economic reform must precede political reform.

However, Assad said that his presidency would turn Syria into an era of democratic reform and economic revival, but most continued his father's authoritarian methods. Relations with the United States deteriorated after Assad denounced the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Nationalist and anti-Western rhetoric soon became a standard part of Assad's speech.

In 2005, Assad reorganized the cabinet, replacing government and military officials from his father's administration into younger officials. This has an impact on economic liberalization primarily benefiting politically connected elites without helping many Syrians who depend on the faltering public sector for jobs or employment, services, and subsidies. (Wieland, 2015)

In 2007, Assad was elected President of Syria for the second time in a general election by an almost unanimous majority which was accepted by critics and opponents as false. In his second term, Assad took several tentative steps to end his country's international exile, trying to improve relations with regional powers, including Turkey and Saudi Arabia. (Zeidan, 2019)

However, this has caused problems arising after Arab countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Oman including Syria, where people want to change the power of the Absolute Monarchy system to be more democratic and people demand that President Assad resign from his leadership chair because of his policy repressive and non-pro-people who are difficult to bear by Syrians. social mobility. Then, President Bashar al-Assad also used the Emergency Act of 1963 to silence the right of opinion and speech of his people to make people feel dissatisfied with the Assad government. (SANA, 2011)

The Assad regime built the country by placing the army as a symbol of power and a tool to control domestic stability, where the army used the opportunity to pressure the people to maintain political stability. The Assad regime was built with four pillars; *first*, maintaining power in the hands of the al-Assad family; *second*, this regime helped unite the Alawi minority; *third*, controlling the entire military-intelligence apparatus; and *fourth*, the Ba'ath party's monopoly over the political system. (Ulutas, 2012)

Moreover, since Bashar al-Assad came to power, socioeconomic inequality increased significantly. These policies have benefited a small part of the country's population, with a strong emphasis on the service sector, most people who have connections

to the government, and the Sunni merchant class members in Aleppo and Damascus. Syria's nominal GDP per capita in 2010 was only \$ 2,834 comparable to Sub-Saharan countries such as Nigeria, and significantly lower than neighboring countries such as Lebanon, and its annual growth rate was 3.39% below those of most developing countries. (CEIC, 2010)

In addition, youth unemployment was relatively high in Syria. In Syria's poor areas, especially mainly among conservative Sunnis, discontent against the government was stronger at the beginning of the War. It also included areas with high poverty rates, including Dara'a and Homs. (Larsen, 2011) From 2006 to 2011, the greatest drought ever recorded in history hit Syria, which resulted in widespread crop failure, increased food prices, and mass migration from farming families to urban centers. This is a problem in the ongoing Syrian Civil War. (Deutscher, 2005)

The human rights situation in Syria has become a major topic and has received criticism from global organizations. The country was tightly controlled by the Syrian Government even before the war. The right to freedom of citizenship has been under the government from 1963 to 2011. Also, Syrian security forces have great power to arrest and detain civilians. Initially, Bashar Al-Assad promised democratic change with the Spring of Damascus 2000, but according to a Human Rights Watch report released just before the Syrian Civil War, Assad has certainly failed. (Human Rights Watch, 2011)

## **B. THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR**

First of all, the Syrian Civil War occurred due to the opposition protest against the government of President Bashar al-Assad. The rich gap combined with the recession and several years of drought, which led to an expansion of the rise of the Arab world in Syria has exacerbated this reform. Protests spread rapidly in northern Syria to Kurdish-dominated areas. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019)

The factors causing the Syrian Civil War including social, economic and domestic political problems experienced by Syria such as high unemployment rates, widespread corruption, limited opportunities for social mobility, lack of political freedom, and state repression under President Bashar Al-Assad, and the demands from the Syrian population for reform and replacement of the Assad family regime in power from 1970 to the present. (Fahham & Kartaatmaja, 2014)

Bashar al-Assad, a Sunni Muslim born and educated in Britain, initially inspired hopes of democratic reforms; Bashar was not able to implement his promised reforms according to his critics. (MacFarquhar & Stack, 2011)

There were several rebel groups in the Syrian civil war, those groups were the Syrian government's Armed Forces and its international allies, the Sunni opposition rebel groups including the Free Syrian Army, Salafi jihadist groups including al-Nusra Front, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and countries involved to support the Assad Government or opposition groups

such as the United States, Turkey, Russia, Iran, China, as well as others. (Abboud, 2017)

Mass protests in Syria began on January 26, 2011, which wanted political reform and restoration of civil rights, and wanted to end the state-controlled situation since 1963. The March 18-19 protest was the biggest protest after the "Day of Rage" in February. The Syrian government has used violence in suppressing demonstrations, using police, military, and paramilitary forces extensively. With the violence carried out by the Syrian Government against the demonstrators, its angered Syrians in other regions which eventually spread to cities such as Hama, Dayar Al-Zor and Al-Hasaka, the demands that were delivered at the end were mixed.

On Friday 18 March 2011, there were demonstrations in all regions of Syria where the action became viral on social media and spread throughout the world. This made the government not remain silent, the government did a massive power outage as well as telephone services to prevent the distribution of the video. The demonstration movement was finally used by the opposition to bring down the long-standing regime.

In April 2011, the US imposed sanctions on the Assad government, followed by Barack Obama's executive order on May 18, 2011, targeting Assad and six other senior officials. In fact, EU ministers agreed to add Assad and nine other officials to the list of travel bans and asset freezes. Then, on May 24, 2011, Canada also imposed sanctions on the Syrian Government.

In addition, Syrians were forced to flee in several countries. In May 2011, thousands of people

had fled the war and even more people were displaced in Syria itself.

When the armies attacked and fought at several places, whole towns tried to escape by crossing borders with the thousands of refugees a day. UNHCR reports 4,812,204 registered refugees, including 2,715,789 in Turkey, 1,067,785 in Lebanon and 636,040 in Jordan. (UNHCR, 2011)

Furthermore, on July 15, 2011, the International Committee of the Red Cross declared that this situation should be considered a Syrian civil war. (CBC News, 2013) Hillary Clinton as US Secretary of State said that Assad as President had "lost legitimacy". Barack Obama released a written declaration on August 18, 2011, calling upon Assad to "step aside." (Phillips, 2011)

The revolution that occurred in Syria not only disputed the authoritarianism of President Bashar al-Assad, the dispute between Sunnis and Shi'ah, but also because of the increasingly chaotic circumstances due to the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Syrian Government. Furthermore, during the massive demonstrations, the Assad Regime used the military by force without regard to the security and safety of Syrians.

The use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Civil War has been confirmed by the United Nations. On August 21, 2013, a lethal attack using chemical weapons occurred in Ghouta on the outskirts of Damascus. The attack occurred in the early morning. The area is controlled by the Syrian opposition, but the Syrian Government uses rockets containing sarin

chemicals. The attack resulted in at least 281 people until 1,729 and is considered the deadliest use of chemical weapons since the Iran-Iraq War. (Al-Arbini, 2013)

In addition, the General Elections held in 2014 were considered invalid by various groups. According to the US Secretary of State John Kerry, the election did not have any meaning. The election occurred when the Syrian Civil War experienced divisions at home so that many Syrians chose to save themselves and flee abroad. Furthermore, the election does not cover the whole of Syria including the eastern and northern regions (opposition groups) and only takes place in the Assad's territory.

### **C. US-SYRIAN POLITICAL RELATIONS**

Political relations between the U.S. and Syria commenced in 1835 when the USA initially appointed Aleppo as a U.S. consul, then an Ottoman Empire member. In 1946 the United States established a consulate in Damascus, after the announcement of Syria's independence. On September 7, 1946, the United States appointed George Wadsworth to a diplomatic mission to recognize the independent Syria.

Syria had become as important to the United States as Syria had become to the Crusaders eight centuries earlier in the fall of 1947. It is very important for Syria's location and resources. In the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, Syria became important to the Crusaders as it was situated on the road between Europe and Jerusalem. And, as it was situated in a potential pipeline to pump large volumes of oil from Saudi Arabia to Europe via the Mediterranean coast terminal, Syria was



important for these three Americans in September 1947.

In 1957, Syria asked US Ambassador James S. Moose to leave Damascus as a result of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) coup attempt to topple Syrian President Shukri Al-Quwatli, but the attempt failed and summoned Syrian Ambassador Faris Zain Al-Din to return to Syria. However, US-Syria relations were severed again in 1967 after the Six-Day War (the Israeli-Arab War) which resulted in Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights. Following the achievement of the Agreement on Disengagement between Israel and Syria, US-Syrian relations continued in June 1974, and, after that, US President Richard Nixon visited Damascus on an official trip. (Syrian Embassy in US, 2013)

However, US-Syria relationships were rebuilt in 1974. Since it was founded in 1979, Syria has been listed as a sponsor of state terrorism. The continuing policies in support of terrorism and its former occupation in Lebanon have undermined the efforts of the US and internationally to stabilize Iraq and have led to the pursuit of arms of mass destruction and missile programs. Syria is subject, including under the Syrian Accountability Act, to legal penalties for exports and not eligible for most forms of US support and the purchase of military equipment. (Holly, U.S. Relations with Syria, 2018)

Since 1979, Syria has been on the list of state sponsors of US terrorism and a haven for terrorists, so Syria is considered a secular dictatorship with a poor human rights record. However, Syria rejected its classification by the United States as a state sponsor of terrorism. In 1986 in an interview on CNN, former US

Secretary of State Alexander Haig said that the worst sponsor of terrorism in the world was Syria and there was no doubt about it, because the Syrian government allowed groups such as Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command to operate within its borders. (United States Department of State Publication Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, 2010)

In addition, the US withdrew its ambassador and additional administrative sanctions on Syria in response to evidence of Syria's direct involvement in efforts to blow up an Israeli plane. In 1987, the U.S. Ambassador returned to Damascus because of Syria's positive actions against terrorism such as expelling the Abu Nidal Organization from Syria and helping free US hostages.

During the Gulf War in 1990-91, Syria worked together as a member of a multinational coalition with the United States. The US and Syria also consulted about the Taif Accord and ended the civil war in Lebanon. In 1991, Syrian President Hafez al-Assad accepted President Bush's invitation to attend the Middle East peace conference and to engage in bilateral negotiations with Israel. Syria has improved relations with the United States by securing the release of Western hostages held in Lebanon and lifting travel restrictions on Syrian Jews. Throughout the Clinton presidency, there were several attempts to involve Bashar Al-Assad in Middle East peace negotiations. This included several presidential summits, when President Bill Clinton met with President Hafez al-Assad in Geneva in March 2000.

The Syrian government cooperated with the US in War on Terror after the September 11, 2001 attacks

on the United States. Syrian intelligence warns the US about Al-Qaeda's plans similar to the bombing of USS Cole, which will fly a gliding aircraft carrying explosives to the US Navy's Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain. (Cobain, 2013)

During the Iraq War, Syria's opposition to Iraq worsened Syria's relations with the United States. The problem arose because the Syrian Government failed to prevent foreign fighters from entering Iraq using the Syrian border and refused to deport elements from former Saddam Hussein's government who supported the Iraqi insurgency. However, the very high influx of Iraqi refugees into Syria makes Syrian officials concerned.

Continued interference in Lebanese affairs, its protection of the leadership of Palestinian rejectionist groups in Damascus, its human rights record, and the pursuit of weapons of mass destruction committed by Syria are of concern to the United States. Furthermore, relations between the two countries were reduced after the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. In February 2005, after Hariri's murder, the US withdrew its Ambassador to Washington. (Schmitt & Mazzetti, 2008)

The US also blamed Syria for the movement of al-Qaeda's foreign affiliates to Iraq. Between 2005 and 2007, the movement of foreign fighters peaked; however, Syria tried to reduce the movement through increased border monitoring and improved screening practices of those crossing the border. Since 2009, the Syrian government has indicated a willingness to increase border security cooperation between Iraqi and US forces. (United States Department of State

On September 12, 2006, the U.S. Embassy was attacked by four armed assailants with guns, grenades and a car bomb. Syrian Security Forces successfully countered the attack, killing three attackers and injuring one. Two other Syrians killed during the attack were a government security guard and a passer-by. The Syrian Government publicly stated that terrorists had carried out the attack. The U.S. Government has not received an official Syrian Government assessment of the motives or organization behind the attack, but security was upgraded at U.S. facilities. Both the Syrian ambassador to the U.S., Imad Moustapha, and President Bashar al-Assad, however, blamed U.S. foreign policy in the region as contributing to the incident.

In 2008, the CIA and the U.S. Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) carried out a paramilitary raid targeting Al-Qaeda in Iraq in the town of Sukkariyeh in Abu Kamal. Subsequent reports revealed that nearly a dozen similar operations had taken place in Syria, Pakistan, and elsewhere since a 2004 classified executive order, the Al-Qaida Network Exord, permitted such missions, stipulating that those insensitive countries such as Syria and Pakistan required presidential approval. (MacAskill, 2008)

The US government has imposed a series of economic sanctions on Syria. The chief form of sanctioning results in Syria's inclusion on the list of state sponsors of terrorism. This includes penalties mandated by law, including export sanctions and not be eligible to receive most forms of U.S. assistance. or to buy U.S. military equipment.

Initially, in the period Barack Obama sought to make bilateral relations between the United States and Syria better, with one of the first steps being to revoke the US travel advisory for American citizens traveling that had existed since the embassy bombing attempt in 2006. The US Embassy in Syria reported that "After carefully assessing the current situation in Syria, we determined that circumstances didn't merit extending the travel warning." (World Heritage Encyclopedia, 2002)

Since 2005 after Hariri's assassination, on February 17, 2010, Robert Stephen Ford was chosen by Barack Obama as the new US Ambassador to Syria. Shortly after the appointment of Robert Stephen Ford, William Burns as Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs held talks with President Bashar Al-Assad in an effort to re-establish relations. Then in July 2010, the United States discussed specific steps to promote regional stability, revive Syria-Israel peace talks, and strengthen US-Syria bilateral relations. (Embassy of the United States of America in Damascus, 2010)

In 2011, WikiLeaks released a diplomatic cable between the US embassy in Damascus and the State Department which revealed that until September 2010, the US provided financial support to political opposition groups and related projects, however, Syrian intelligence agents were worried. Funding that began during George W. Bush's presidency included \$ 6 million for the Barada satellite television channel which broadcasts anti-government programs to Syria. Barada TV is closely affiliated with the Movement for Justice and Development, a Syrian exile network based in London. (Whitlock, 2011)

In 2011 the Arab League, the United Nations, and the West condemned the Syrian regime, which eventually became overly heavy and violent during the Syrian Civil War. Many governments of the Middle East initially supported the government and its 'security measures', but as the death toll was rising in Hama in particular, they turned into a more balance-setting approach that criticized both government and protest violence. Russia and China have vetoed sanctions against the Syrian government by the United Nations Security Council.

The Obama administration established a rapprochement policy with Syria. With the violent response of the governments to the Syrian civil war in 2011, however, relations have drastically changed. The senior American officials including President Obama have repeatedly called for the resignation of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.