The Impacts of Human Rights on Food Security in Syria

The purpose of the following timeline and list of groups involved in the conflict in Syria is to give an organized background on the conflict and to give the reader a sense of the complexity of the environment in which Syrians live. These also serve as part of the introduction.

Timeline
2006-2010 One of the worst droughts in recorded history hits Syria. Farmers and herders lose their livelihoods and flock to the cities.
2011 Protesters take to the streets in retaliation of the arrest and torture of two teenagers for graffitiing a building with an anti-government message and the Emergency Law, which allowed arrests without charge. The protesters also demanded the termination of corrupt government officials, the legalization of political parties, and the resignation of Bashar al-Assad.
2014 Syrian government agrees to forfeit its declared chemical weapons. However, the government was later found to be using chemical weapons that had not been disclosed.
2014 Failed peace talks between the Syrian National Coalition and the Assad Regime.

Main Rebel Groups
The Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army.
Martyrs of Syrian Brigades
Northern Storm Brigade
Ahrar Souriya Brigade

Islamist Groups
Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya
Jaysh al-Islam
Suqour al-Sham
Liwa al-Tawhid
Liwa al-Haqq
Kataib Ansar al-Sham
Kurdish Islamic Front

Independent Groups
Ahfad al-Rasoul Brigades
Asala wa al-Tanmiya Front
Durou al-Thawra Commission
Tajammu Ansar al-Islam
Yarmouk Martyrs' Brigade
National Unity Brigades
**Jihadist Groups**  
Al-Nusra Front  
Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isis)  
Jaysh al-Muhajirin wa al-Ansar

**Kurdish Groups**  
Popular Protection Units (YPG)  
(BBC Web.)

Syria: The Arab Spring gone horribly wrong. The conflict there is complex and the solution seems non-existent, which may be why there is so much focus on the refugees coming out of that conflict. With the death toll of the Syrian conflict, which climbed to a quarter million in August 2015 and still rising, Syrians are pouring out of the war torn country. But what about the people still in Syria? What about the land and crafts that the refugees have left behind? And how do the human rights violations in this country affect the food security of its population that still remains?

**A Syrian Family**
The average Syrian family has between 2 and 3 children and an average size of household of 5.8. The World Fact Book shows that the school life expectancy is the same for boys and girls: 12 years; 86.4% of the population over the age of 15 is literate; 91.7% of males over 15 are literate and 81% of female over 15 are literate.

The average diet for a Syrian is much like that of many other Middle Eastern countries. Common meals include hummus, stuffed grape leaves, falafel (fried ground chickpeas), and farooj (roasted chicken with onions and chilies). (EveryCulture Web.) However, access to meat is currently low as prices have skyrocketed, and access to food in general is a problem that Syrians consistently face due to a variety of factors that will be discussed in this essay.

Access to healthcare has been severely damaged by the Civil War due to factors such as travel restrictions, broken machinery, shortage of healthcare professionals, who have been killed or have emigrated. Before the war, the healthcare system was an equivalent of middle income countries such as Brazil. However, the healthcare system has essentially collapsed in the wake of the conflict.

**The Urban Areas**
Over half the country, 57.7% live in urban areas. (World Fact Book Web.). Before the Civil War in Syria, and even in the first months of the conflict, the average wage was about 12000 Syrian pounds or 225 USD. Average consumption was between SYP 31500 ($670) and SYP 42,000 ($890). Even at this point the ability of the average Syrian family to obtain basic necessities was doubtful. In 2013 the average wage was less than 16000 ($150, due to inflation). Inflation has led to much higher prices of goods, despite lower wages. In the same year, it was found that 80% of the Syrian population live in poverty. (Al akhbar Web.) The unemployment rate of the country currently sits at 35.8%. (The World Fact Book.)

Access to food markets is very limited as well. The Civil War in Syria is extremely complicated by the many groups involved in the conflict, who control various areas. This greatly affects the transport and availability of food. Farmers who are fortunate enough to still have access to their land seeking a market for their crops in the city are often turned away if there is an expected security threat. If this happens,
most of the food goes to waste and the farmers lose potential income. The restriction of movement also serves as a detriment to farmers getting seeds to plant their next crop.

Many people are also afraid to go to markets for fear of being shot by the various military forces in their region, so they grow food in their backyards and in empty lots. Buying food has also gotten more difficult financially. The price of food has increased as much as 300% in some cases. The harvest in 2014 was also one of the worst in recent memory with the wheat crop below 2 million or even 1.5 million tons. The average demand for the country is about 4 million tons.

Many who live in cities have to grow vegetables in their backyards to survive. In the area of Yarmouk, which is 5 miles South of Damascus the capital of Syria, the people have begun an initiative to feed themselves, known as 15th garden. They have turned garbage lots and other vacant areas into gardens to grow food. (Modern Farmer Web.)

**Further Barriers**

Syria is a country made up primarily of deserts and grassland. Only about 30% of the country is farmable. Despite this, statistics from 2002 showed that agriculture made up 40% of Syria’s GDP and 30% of its workplace was employed in the industry. (New Agriculturalist Web)

Water scarcity has also had a large part to play in the Syrian conflict. Between 2006 and 2010, Syria suffered from a severe drought. In Hassakeh, a north west province, about 75% of those dependent on agriculture experienced total crop failure because much of the crop was dependant on rainwater. The herders in the Kurdish northeastern part of the country lost about 85% of their livestock. (Word Press Web.) The farmers whose livelihoods were left in ruins by the drought flocked to the cities. This had a large impact on food production. Thus prices rose and it became more difficult for people to provide themselves with sufficient amounts of food, much less nutritious, balanced diets, an essential part of life which every person has a right to. (IRIN Web.) Decades before the drought, in 1975, Turkey began to build hydroelectric dams, a project that has cut down on waterflow into Syria by 40%. How has this impacted Human Rights in Syria? The Declaration of Human Rights states that every person has a right to life and the ability to sustain themselves.

In one horrific case, a town was surrounded by land mines placed along its borders by pro-government forces, and the residents were slowly starving to death. This is Madaya, a town on the Syrian Lebanese border. Aid had not been let in until recently. This tactic is used by pro-government and anti-government forces. There are 15 other areas in this situation across Syria. (Aljazeera Web.)

**Human Rights**

What are Human Rights? As the Human Rights Watch defines them they are rights that belong to every person, regardless of any societal category they belong to. Some specific human rights of the Syrian people that have been violated include not to be subjected to torture or cruel treatment, not to be arrested for arbitrary arrest or detention, to move freely in one’s own country, to be paid an amount that ensures human dignity for oneself and one’s family, and the right to life or sustaining life in this case. These are just the rights that have been violated that affect food security in Syria. (Declaration of Human Rights Web.)
A major concern about the Civil War in Syria is Human Rights violations. The country is plagued with indiscriminate attacks on civilians, from both rebel groups and the regime. (Human Rights Watch Web.) The food security of Syrians is endangered because it has become very unsafe to travel to a market, for both farmers and others, to buy and sell food. Syrian Security Forces also make it doubly dangerous to travel because of detaining civilians arbitrarily and sometimes subjecting them to torture. There are also many check points and territories held by various groups that restrict freedom of movement. Paying for food is also difficult because wages have gone down and prices have gone up. And the lack of available food and water in the country has violated the right to life and its sustenance.

**Solution?**

With a conflict so violent with so many parts and players a solution is hard to see. A possible short term solution could be the creation of routes for farmers and citizens to markets, secured, perhaps, by UN forces. However, these Humanitarian efforts could also be targeted at making sure farmers have the tools they need to grow and harvest their crops and that citizens have preservation methods available so they might sustain themselves in times of hardship. This was actually the strategy of many Americans during WW2. They grew “Victory Gardens” because access to food was limited because so much of it was going towards supporting the troops in Europe. Organizations such as the World Food Programme and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent are currently providing aid in Syria in the form of food. These programmes are and will likely remain large parts of battling hunger in Syria.

In terms of the role of communities, the people of the towns and cities of Syria should continue to grow their own food until the economy can be stabilized and the conflict is ended. 15th Garden is a good example of what can be done to sustain Syrians in such turbulent times. Communities should also be willing to share food if the crop of some individuals fails or is eaten by rodents. This initiative would only require the materials to grow food on small plots of land and the energy to tend to crops another effort that humanitarian aid can help fund if materials are not present. A typical family would need to work their land and learn sustainable methods of subsistence farming.

Ending the conflict in Syria doesn’t even seem possible. Groups have varying motives and goals and it is unclear as to whether these would be set aside to unite and reclaim Syria from Assad. To make matters worse in the region, the U.S. and Russia are in some ways involved in the conflict. The U.S. had a “train and equip program” that was a miserable failure, and is under the impression that the removal of Assad will cause ISIS to come into power. Russia has actively protected the Assad regime and even made a nuclear weapons deal with the regime when Assad was in real danger of being overthrown. One theory is that if Assad is to be overthrown, it will be done by cutting off his Russian, and also Iranian, sponsors. If there is anything about this conflict that I can feel certain about it is that if it ends, it will end with the resignation or forcible removal of Assad. The Arab Spring must be completed in order for this to end. The overall situation of the Syrian people cannot improve very much otherwise. A united rebel force seems to be the key element in “solving” Syria. But above all human decency and respect of human rights is what is needed to reconstruct a Syrian society in ruins.
Bibliography


