

How does polycrisis show up in the world? What are the signs?

Case Study: The Syrian crisis

Beginning in 2011, Syria provides us with an example of a complex and multifaceted conflict with deep-rooted historical, political, social, and economic factors. It has manifested in several ways, impacting not only Syria but also neighbouring countries and the global community.

Origins and Causes

Political Repression and Corruption: Under the rule of the Assad family, Syria experienced decades of political repression and widespread corruption. The government's authoritarian practices, including limiting political freedoms and suppressing opposition, created significant discontent among the population.

Economic Hardships: Before the conflict, Syria faced significant economic challenges, including high unemployment, especially among youth, and economic policies that favoured elites and exacerbated inequalities. The rural economic downturn, partly due to drought and mismanagement of agricultural policies, also displaced many, who then moved to urban areas where they faced poverty and lack of opportunities.

Drought and Climate Change: From 2006 to 2011, Syria suffered a devastating drought that led to significant agricultural failure and the displacement of rural communities. This environmental disaster exacerbated existing economic and social tensions and contributed to the unrest.

Social Fragmentation: Syria's diverse ethnic and religious composition — including Sunni Arabs, Kurds, Alawites, Christians, and other groups — has been a source of tension, especially as the Assad regime, primarily composed of Alawites, often favoured certain groups over others, fostering resentment.

Manifestations of the Crisis

Civil War: Protests that began in 2011 as part of the Arab Spring quickly escalated into a full-scale civil war after the government's violent crackdowns on demonstrators. The war has drawn in various factions, including rebel groups, jihadist militants like ISIS, and Kurdish forces, each with different goals and backers.

Humanitarian Disaster: The war has led to one of the worst humanitarian crises of the 21st century. Hundreds of thousands have died, and millions have been displaced internally and abroad. Cities and infrastructure have been destroyed, leading to a loss of basic services like healthcare, water, and electricity.

Refugee Crisis: Millions of Syrians have fled the country, seeking refuge in neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, as well as in Europe. This exodus has strained resources and exacerbated social and political tensions in host countries.

Use of Chemical Weapons and War Crimes: There have been numerous reports and evidence of war crimes, including the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government against civilians. These actions have drawn international condemnation and led to targeted sanctions and military strikes by Western powers.

International Involvement and Geopolitical Shifts: The Syrian conflict has attracted deep international involvement. Russia and Iran have supported the Assad government militarily and diplomatically, while the United States, Turkey, and various Gulf states have supported different opposition groups. This international proxy war has complicated peace efforts and influenced regional and global geopolitics.

Economic Collapse: The ongoing conflict, coupled with sanctions, mismanagement, and corruption, has devastated Syria's economy. The Syrian pound has plummeted, inflation has skyrocketed, and poverty is widespread, exacerbating the suffering of the Syrian people.

Continuing Evolution: The Syrian crisis continues to evolve, with profound implications for regional stability and international relations. It has led to one of the most significant migration movements in recent history, profoundly impacting Syria, neighbouring countries, and beyond. The migration issues stemming from this crisis are complex and multifaceted, involving humanitarian concerns, security issues, and political implications.

Impact on, e.g. migration from the Syrian Crisis

Scale of Displacement: More than half of Syria's pre-war population has been displaced. Over six million Syrians are internally displaced within the country, and approximately 5.7 million have fled to other countries. The primary host countries are Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, with significant numbers also seeking asylum in Europe, particularly Germany and Sweden.

Humanitarian Issues: Refugees and displaced persons face critical challenges, including inadequate shelter, lack of necessities, and limited access to healthcare and education. Living conditions in refugee camps and informal settlements are often poor, with overcrowding and insufficient sanitation facilities. Vulnerable populations, such as children, women, the elderly, and people with disabilities, face particular risks, including exploitation and abuse.

Economic Impact: Host countries face significant economic strains, needing to provide services and infrastructure to support the influx of refugees, often without sufficient international support. While refugees contribute to the local economy in some areas, their presence can also lead to job competition, potentially increasing tensions with local populations. Many refugees find only informal or low-paying jobs, and they often work under exploitative conditions.

Social and Cultural Integration: Integration into host communities is a significant challenge due to cultural, religious, and linguistic differences. There are often tensions between refugees and local populations, fuelled by economic competition, cultural misunderstandings, and xenophobia. Efforts to integrate into host societies vary widely, with some countries providing pathways to citizenship or permanent residency and others offering more limited forms of temporary protection.

Political and Security Concerns: The arrival of large numbers of refugees has had political ramifications in host countries, influencing domestic policies and sometimes leading to political

instability. Security concerns are prevalent, with fears of infiltration by militant groups or the spread of extremism, although such cases are rare compared to the overall refugee population. Policy responses range from open borders and the welcoming of refugees to stringent controls and restricted entry, reflecting varying political and public attitudes toward migration.

International Response and Responsibility: The international community's response has included humanitarian aid, resettlement programs, and diplomatic efforts to resolve the Syrian conflict. However, aid has often been insufficient, and political solutions have remained elusive. There are ongoing debates regarding the responsibilities of countries to accept refugees, share burdens, and support international humanitarian efforts financially.

Long-term Implications: Many Syrian refugees may not return to their country for years, if ever, leading to protracted displacement situations. The long-term integration of refugees into host countries, or their eventual return to Syria, poses significant cultural, economic, and social challenges. The impact on the younger generation of Syrians, many of whom have spent significant parts of their childhood in displacement, is particularly profound, affecting their educational and social development.

The migration issues related to the Syrian crisis highlight the need for coordinated international efforts to manage large-scale displacement humanely and effectively. It underscores the importance of addressing root causes of conflicts, enhancing the resilience of affected populations, and ensuring sustainable solutions for refugees and host communities alike.

Early Clues

In the case of the Syrian crisis, several early warning signs and potential intervention points might have been seized upon to prevent or mitigate the escalation of the conflict. The conflict's complexity means that simple solutions were unlikely, but certain actions might have influenced the trajectory of events.

Political Repression and Lack of Freedoms:

Clue: Before the uprising, Syria was characterised by significant political repression under the Assad regime, which included limited freedom of expression, a lack of political pluralism, and harsh crackdowns on dissent.

Economic Hardship and Unemployment:

Clue: High unemployment rates, particularly among youth, and economic policies that disproportionately benefited the elite, contributed to widespread dissatisfaction.

Impact of Drought and Environmental Degradation:

Clue: The prolonged drought that affected Syria from 2006 to 2011 led to significant agricultural failure and rural displacement, exacerbating economic and social stresses.

Rising Social Tensions and Sectarianism:

Clue: Increasing sectarian tensions between different religious and ethnic groups were evident, as were grievances from economically and politically marginalised groups.

Early Protests and Government Crackdowns:

Clue: The initial protests in 2011, part of the wider Arab Spring, were met with severe government repression, including the use of lethal force against peaceful protesters.

Regional Dynamics and Historical Context:

Clue: The geopolitical context, including Syria's role in regional politics and its alliances with countries like Iran and Russia, influenced the conflict.

Potential Responses

Political Repression and Lack of Freedoms:

Potential Response: International pressure and diplomacy could have been used more aggressively to advocate for political reforms and human rights improvements. Encouraging dialogue between the government and opposition groups in a constructive manner might have helped ease tensions.

Economic Hardship and Unemployment:

Potential Response: Support for economic development initiatives through international aid and investment, focused on creating jobs and improving living standards, could have helped alleviate some of the economic pressures that contributed to the unrest.

Impact of Drought and Environmental Degradation:

Potential Response: International aid and development programs could have focused on water management, sustainable agriculture, and aid for displaced rural populations to prevent them from becoming economically desperate and politically volatile.

Rising Social Tensions and Sectarianism:

Potential Response: Initiatives to promote social cohesion and inclusion, facilitated by neutral international bodies, could have helped address these tensions. Programs designed to foster inter-group dialogue and mutual understanding might have reduced the potential for conflict.

Early Protests and Government Crackdowns:

Potential Response: Swift and united international condemnation of the violence, coupled with strong diplomatic efforts to mediate the conflict, might have pressured the Assad regime to adopt a more restrained and conciliatory approach. Targeted sanctions against key government figures early in the crisis might also have been effective.

Regional Dynamics and Historical Context:

Potential Response: Engaging in proactive diplomacy that includes regional stakeholders could have helped address some of the broader tensions. Efforts to engage Syria's allies in discussions about the potential regional fallout from continued instability might have encouraged them to exert pressure for moderation.