

## Working paper 8<sup>TH</sup> CEMOFPSC CONFERENCE

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THE 'ARAB SPRING': The Conflict in Syria:  
Current status and consequences  
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Casa Árabe, Hall of Ambassadors

The Center for Middle East Studies, part of the Foundation for Social Promotion of Culture, was founded years ago to create a forum for dialogue among experts in this Region.

After 25 years of uninterrupted work in this area, we have often confronted with the lack of knowledge in Spain and in general, the Western countries, of what the 'Middle East' is about; its culture, history, traditions, religions, social structures, etc.

The activities carried out by CEMOFPSC over the course of these years have provided material for an in-depth reflection on different aspects of this region's idiosyncrasies. These activities do not try to postulate theories, but are instead focused on providing tools so that the best decisions can be taken by having better knowledge and be better informed.

The project that we are talking about is extremely ambitious. Syria is going through a complex conflict due to, among other reasons, the country's great importance in the region and the Middle East's great importance in the world.

In a way, the conflict in Syria started on January 26<sup>th</sup> 2011, influenced by other protests in other Arabic countries demanding changes in their governments and the defence of their human rights. In countries such as: Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Libya and Bahrain the outcomes are far from being final and are not as optimistic as was thought of in the beginning. In Syria, the purpose of those who oppose the regime of President Bashar al-Assad is to overthrow the government.

Syria's strategic importance could explain the apparent inaction of the international community, which has condemned the Syrian government's attacks against the rebels, but has not directly intervened, as it has done in other Arab countries. Moreover, the world economic and social context has forced the international community to focus on its own domestic policies.

However, there is no doubt of the conflict's internationalisation. During the conflict and in addition to fighting the rebels within the country, the Syrian government has also fought: Turkey, Israel and the Lebanon outside its borders. The Syrian rebels have received different levels of support from Turkey, the West, and the Arab

countries on the Persian Gulf –particularly Qatar– and the Governments of Iran, Russia, and China and, in another arena, from the Hezbollah.

According to the United Nations, the war in Syria leaves 4 million people defenceless and 1.5 million refugees in other countries (registered and unregistered). Furthermore, death toll from the conflict exceeds 80,000 people, with twice that number in injuries.

Religious cleansing is already taking place in many cities of the country which is increasingly divided. All religious denominations are being affected, but the situations of the Christian minorities is particularly serious, present in Syria for almost 2,000 years and represent ten percent of the population, according to reports by the Human Rights Watch (HRW). They are increasingly becoming an easy target. HRW also reports on the pillaging and burning of churches and other places of worship, as happened in Iraq several years ago. Everything points to the fact that Syria could end without a Christian presence, as they are fleeing the country.

The Foundation for Social Promotion of Culture, which started its work in Lebanon in 1992, is today working hard to handle the Syrian refugees who are flooding into the country under dramatic conditions directly. This is also being done in Jordan.

Here we offer a brief overview of what is happening on the ground. The situation that the refugees are experiencing is very different depending on the country in question, the responses of the different governments and local conditions.

Depending on their possibilities families inside Syria continue to flee the country. Their destinations are the bordering countries. In Jordan, Turkey and Iraq, Syrian refugees are being sheltered in camps in which they have limited movement and from which they are prohibited from leaving. The overcrowding, extremely difficult living conditions and absolute dependence on humanitarian aid produce dramatic stories.

On the other hand, the Governments of Lebanon and Egypt have yet to take specific measures for the refugees. Particularly, Lebanon, a country with evident and historical bonds with Syria, is one of the countries that has received the largest number of refugees, despite its bad experience with Palestinian refugee camps. In the earlier stages of the conflict, people arrived with high economic levels, who were able to integrate into Lebanese society. Over time and with the upsurge in the conflict, the Syrian population has been arriving under much worse conditions, which obliges the country to make great efforts to assimilate them, when the saturation point has already been reached.

The first Syrian refugees were placed in the farming and construction sectors and have slowly been bringing the rest of their families over. Although a few settlements were equipped with provisional tents, the majority are dispersed throughout the country, living in fragile social situations (several families living together in abandoned buildings or under construction, paying exorbitant rents, etc.).

In recent months, job possibilities have drastically fallen, with the ensuing increase in tension due to competition with local workers. The presence of unemployed refugees has also increased begging and insecurity on the streets. However, it must also be pointed out that the response of Lebanese society has been extremely positive and both local and religious communities are significantly helping the refugees, who keep pouring in.

Currently, when no end to the conflict is in sight, those involved in international development are designing training plans and employment creation plans. These interventions could be considered *transnational development*, as they also focus on the host countries. Their aim is to lower social tensions, which could have highly negative social consequences.

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