

Advocacy for Syrian refugees

Dr Bénédicte Halba, president of IRIV (www.iriv.net), February 2025

For associations and NGOs that welcome and support refugees and asylum seekers, signals that may have an impact on government decisions, and on the processing of outstanding files, are carefully scrutinized. It is better to anticipate changes for not being caught off guard and being prepared to face the events. The lives of thousands, sometimes millions people, are at stake. The administration's sweeping decisions, taking advantage of troubled geopolitics to harden the reception and asylum conditions of communities suddenly considered safe, are to be monitored carefully.

The year 2025 began as the year 2024 ended in a major geopolitical destabilization. The fall of the regime of Bashar al-Assad on 8th of December 2024 was the most surprising element, for laypeople but also for specialists. Dorothee Schmid, head of the Turkey and Middle East programme at the French Institute for International Relations, puts it very well (1). The regime of the Syrian dictator was an "empty shell" artificially concocted by the Arab League, which joined in with the "pseudo-solution agreed by the Russia-Iran-Turkey top trio", which cynically shared the spoils of a bloodless country. Cynicism is the word that comes to mind when we know that Vladimir Putin, the Russian president, has granted political asylum to his Syrian ally, family and relatives, for «humanitarian reasons».

Bashar al-Assad and his clan have been investigated in conditions that would be appreciated by the 3 million Syrians who were exiled by the dictator, who caused the death of 150,000 people. Not to mention the persecution of his population for more than fifty years (2). Russian military and political support is not disinterested. Four years after the start of the civil war in Syria (in 2011), the country has enjoyed unwavering support from Russia (that began in September 2015). Russian planes have transported the Assad clan several times with considerable sums of money. According to the NGO Global Witness, specializing in the fight against the plundering of natural resources and corruption, prominent members of an allied family (the Makhlof), placed under US and European sanctions, own 38 million Euros of real estate in the business district of Moscow, «Moscow City». Between 2018 and 2019, Bashar al-Assad sent two tons of notes representing 250 million dollars from the Central Bank of Syria (3). Companies have been created to manage this massive misappropriation of money from the Syrian people. They were sometimes coordinated from Lebanon, whose leaders have become specialists in large-scale misappropriation of public money and money laundering (4).

The HTC fighters, who helped bring down the Assad clan, enabled journalists from the Agence France-Presse (AFP) to discover millions of Captagon tablets (containing amphetamine) in Syrian military warehouses and hangars in 2024. It became an illicit drug whose production and export, organized and directed by the regime of Bashar al-Assad, transformed Syria into a narco-state (5). Iran's support of the Assad clan may have helped to bring it closer to the Shiite terrorist militia it supports, Hezbollah in Lebanon, which engages in similar activities of drug trafficking and money laundering.

Another plague of Syria, whose first victims were the Syrian refugees, has been the development of international terrorism. According to the researcher Hugo Micheron, holder of the chair of excellence for the Middle East and the Mediterranean from the Ecole Normale Supérieure, who investigated jihadism in France and abroad (6), there were three phases of departure of fanatical Europeans to Syria which followed the evolution of the Syrian crisis. The country entered a civil war in summer 2011. A year later, in 2012, the conflict becomes confessional ; the opposition to Bashar al-Assad is jihadist with a group affiliated with Al Qaeda who breaks in 2013 with Daesh (Islamic State). In 2014, this autonomous group proclaims the caliphate that reached its peak in 2016 before collapsing from summer and disappearing in 2019, leaving thousands of European jihadists in the country.

In 2025, Syria is under special surveillance by Western intelligence agencies that do not like uncertainty. The Islamic State (ISIS) has been defeated but hopes to reconstitute its forces. For the director of the French Intelligence service (DGSE) the fall of the Al Assad regime raises three questions (7). The first is the contingent of a hundred French jihadists, and judicialized, who are free in the Syrian Northeast. The second issue is the fate of hundreds of adults and as many minors, imprisoned for terrorism and monitored by Kurdish forces, loyal and effective allies of Europeans and Americans in the fight against terrorism. The last point is the attitude of the new Syrian regime towards ISIS, which is currently a declared enemy. According to researcher Hugo Micheron, the European jihadists who left for Syria in 2012 were «ideologized pioneers» invested in the cause since the early 2000s, leaving with paramilitary equipment, taking “the builders of a new moral order in Syria, a territory where they impose sharia and their Salafist-jihadist way of life” against the Syrians, the first victims of this imported terrorism. «It was anything but humanitarian» adds Hugo Micheron, as the rescue of the Syrian dictator by the Russian president.

As soon as the fall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime was announced on 8 December 2024, several European countries that have welcomed Syrians who have been brutally driven out of their countries since 2011 by multiple threats, have announced the freezing of asylum procedures and are considering refugees returning to their countries: Germany, the first host country (47000 cases pending), Denmark, Sweden, Norway or France (8). This precipitation is surprising as the country is in ruins after 14 years of civil war (2011-2024) with a population martyred by more than 50 years of dictatorship of the Assad clan (1970-2025), and an absence of Western delegations since 2012 leaving the field free to states more concerned with their interests than those of Syria (Russia, Iran, Turkey, Qatar). For Manon Nour Tannous, a French-Syrian doctor of international relations, the 1963 Ba'ath revolution that brought the Assad clan to power in 1970 seemed irreversible and eternal (9). With the fall of the regime in December 2024, “The challenges are immense and the future uncertain. Yet this uncertainty in place of eternity changes everything.”

The European Union decided to put an end to the sanctions imposed to Syria on the 27th of January 2025 (10). This is a point of light for Syrians. For Syrian asylum seekers and refugees in Europe, they need time to return to a stable and safe country. Geopolitical chaos is often a fertile breeding ground for terrorists and predatory states. Syrians abroad need more time to decide, calmly and without haste, to come back to their country.

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- (1) Dorothee Schmid « Le retournement de situation en Syrie met l'Occident face à ses responsabilités », Le Monde, 11 décembre 2024
- (2) Isabelle Mandraud « Le réfugié de Poutine », Le Monde, 25 & 26 décembre 2024
- (3) published in the Financial Times du 15 décembre 2024
- (4) the former governor of the Lebanese central bank (1993-2023) Ryad Salamé was indicted in September 2024 after several international arrest warrants issued by the French justice and Interpol. The international firm Kroll, has recorded transactions of an amount of 8 billion dollars (7.2 billion euros) between 2015 and 2018 from the cashier of the Lebanese bank to a company managed by a relative of Mr. Salamé. Helène Sallon, Le Monde, 4 September 2024.
- (5) blog published by Marc Gozlan , journaliste médico-scientifique, [16 décembre 2024](#) , « Le captagon, cette drogue illicite qui a transformé la Syrie en narco-État », hébergé par le site du Monde.
- (6) interview with Hugo Micheron « Les djihadistes sont à l'aise dans l'enclavement territorial et communautaire » , Le Monde, 7 janvier 2020
- (7) interview with Nicolas Lerner, propos recueillis par Christophe Ayad, Le Monde, mardi 14 janvier 2025
- (8) editorial in Le Monde, « Réfugiés syriens : la précipitation choquante des pays européens », 13 décembre 2024
- (9) Manon-Nour Tannous « Les défis de la Syrie après l'éternité », Le Monde, 22 & 23 décembre 2024
- (10) Editorial du Monde « Le pari de l'Europe », lundi 27 janvier 2025