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## The Drought That Felled Assad



Image by Zetong Li.

The meteorological drought that swept through the Fertile Crescent (stretching from the Tigris and Euphrates to the Nile Valley) in the 2000s finally ended up undoing the Assad regime in Syria and forcing Bashar al-Assad to flee to Moscow [under the cover of night](#) last month. At first glance, [drought or its driver in climate change](#) seems to have little to do with a geopolitical event like the fall of the Assad regime. However, the fall of the regime has been years in the making, and climate-related issues played a large role.

The decline of the Assad regime began with a protracted drought in 1998, the likes of which [the Middle East had not seen in the past nine centuries](#). The [drought's severity reached its peak in 2006-2011](#) in northeastern Syria, which is the country's breadbasket, comprising the Euphrates and Jazira regions. These regions produce [two-thirds of the country's crop yield](#), especially Syria's staple, wheat.

At its peak, the drought caused agriculture, the green anchor of the Syrian economy, to collapse. Agricultural production, which generates one-fourth of the country's GDP, [dropped to 17 percent](#). But this aggregate impact doesn't capture the devastation it wrought on millions of rural residents, farmers, and herders whose individual farm production fell to [zero or near-zero](#). Syria, which was the only country in the Fertile Crescent (Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine) that was [self-sufficient in foodgrain production, became an importer of wheat](#) in 2008.

Hafez al-Assad, Bashar al-Assad's father, who ruled the country from 1971 to 2000, founded his reign on [Baathist socialist ideology](#). He helped expand agriculture by subsidizing the ever-growing cost of farm inputs and even insuring against the crop failures that were frequent in the dryland agricultural system. State subsidies buffered millions of rural residents, farmers, and herders against unexpected meteorological and market-driven shocks. His son, on the other hand, reversed all that. [Introducing neoliberal policies](#), Bashar al-Assad left everyone on their own. On his watch, capital-rich farmers prospered while the rest kept falling through the cracks.

Although dryland agriculture is the mainstay of the Syrian economy, the country has a significant portion of irrigated agriculture that is predominantly drained by the Euphrates, and to a far lesser degree by the Tigris. But with climate change, [both waterways were drying up](#), especially the Khabur, Syria's main tributary to the Euphrates, which saturates the northeastern region of Hasaka. The Khabur has been the iconic source of Syrian agriculture for millennia, [whose significance to farming earned it a mention in the Old Testament as "Habor."](#) Desiccated, the Khabur couldn't now reach the Euphrates, a failure that had long sown suspicions in downstream Iraq, which is the largest beneficiary of Euphrates water.

Hit by another [drought](#) in the mid-1970s, the [Euphrates saw its flow of 15.3 billion cubic meters](#) (BCM) to Iraq in 1973 drop drastically to 9.4 BCM in 1975. Iraq accused Syria of diverting its share of water. Syria blamed Turkey, which is home to the headwaters of the Euphrates, Tigris, and Khabur, for the reduced flow. Unconvinced, [Iraq deployed tens of thousands of troops to the Iraq-Syrian border](#) in 1975. Damascus answered in kind. A shooting war between upstream and downstream neighbors nearly erupted before the former Soviet Union disengaged the two thirsty foes.

The drought in 2006-11 triggered a mass migration from the rural hinterlands to urban centers. An estimated [1.5 million rural residents were displaced to the fringes of urban centers](#). Displaced Syrians were all "climate refugees" who were without jobs, income, and, above all, any hope to begin a new life. The concentration of despair was highly combustible,

and it could easily turn into a conflagration. The spark that ignited this highly flammable situation was the influx of even more drought-driven refugees from neighboring Iraq, bringing urban centers and their scarce services under unprecedented strain.

The influx of Iraqi refugees peaked in 2007 [at 1.5 million](#), bringing the total along with internally displaced Syrians to 3 million. By 2010, [these climate refugees amounted to one-fifth of the Syrian urban population. In 2002-2010, Syria added 50 percent more](#) to its [urban population of \\$22 million](#). The drought-driven ecological instability shook the Assad regime to its foundation in 2011, when the urban uprising erupted, and for the first time Assad's grip on power began to slip.

The first major protest occurred in the "[impoverished drought-stricken rural province of Daraa](#)" in March 2011. As protests spread, Homs, Syria's largest city in terms of territory, became the epicenter of political uprising. In July 2012, Syria's most populous city of [Aleppo fell to the opposition](#). In 2013, Raqqa on the Euphrates, which sits next to the country's largest dam (Tabqa Dam) and the biggest reservoir (Lake Assad), was occupied by the Syrian opposition. In January 2014, Raqqa was seized by the Islamic State to become the capital of its caliphate.

The Assad regime, completely resourceless and under a ruthless sanctions regime, had few means to help desperate Syrians struggling to survive. Although poor in ecological and economic resources to cope with a natural disaster, Assad still had a monopoly over violence, [the defining feature of a Weberian state](#). Unable to provide any relief to millions of his masses, Assad simply deployed violence to keep a lid on mass eruptions. [By 2016, he regained control of major cities including Aleppo](#). By 2020, the civil war had ended.

But Assad's repressive measures, including the [alleged use of chemical weapons](#) against his own people, elicited a global response that left him and his regime further weakened and those arrayed against him even more emboldened. Soon he was losing the one resource that he thought he controlled: the monopoly over violence. His opposition, meanwhile, was receiving support from the United States, Turkey (a NATO member with the largest military in Europe), Israel and the United Arab Emirates.

Unbeknownst to him, Assad's sclerotic regime was fast hollowing out. Four years after regaining control over much of Syria, the Assad regime fell in just 10 days, when a coalition of the opposition in Hayat Tahrir-al-Shaam (HTS) overran it. The opposition's blitzkrieg began with the fall of the drought-stricken [city of Aleppo in the north](#) on November 29. Buoyed by the biggest prize, HTS troops advanced to Hama. The next were Daraa, the [cradle of the anti-Assad revolution](#), and Homs, the crown jewel of Syria's irrigated farming,

which were captured on December 7. [Aleppo, Hama, Daraa, and Homs](#) had all been at some point agriculturally well-endowed regions.

On December 7, HTS troops reached the peripheries of their ultimate prize, Damascus, the capital. Many of HTS troops defied their command and entered the city, overtaking the main buildings. The next day, the Syrian military practically dissolved itself and Russia whisked Assad away to Moscow. HTS advanced from the north to the south all the way to Damascus and [Deir ez-Zor in the east](#).

Can the incoming rulers save Syria from future drought disasters? [Fifty-five percent of Syria is desert](#) that burns with aridity. Due to ever-soaring temperatures, [two-thirds of the Euphrates, Tigris, and Khabur have evaporated](#), leaving behind little for irrigated farming. The incoming rulers, whose credentials are anchored in lifelong careers fueling an insurgency, can hardly match the looming existential threats in climate change or its manifestations in meteorological droughts.

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*This first appeared on Foreign Policy in Focus.*

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