From Libya to Syria: Navigating Displacement Crises Post-Regime

Background

The First Libyan Civil War and the Syrian Civil War were part of the broader Arab Spring uprisings that began in Tunisia in late 2010 and spread across the Middle East and North Africa. Both civil wars began in 2011 and emerged from a wave of protests demanding economic and social dignity, democracy, and an end to longstanding authoritarian regimes.

Libya (2011)—A Rapid Collapse. In February 2011, Libyans rose against Muammar al-Qaddafi after over 40 years of rule. The uprising quickly escalated into a full-scale civil war, with opposition forces—under the representation of the Transitional Council (TNC)—seizing territory in eastern Libya. The United Nations (UN) Security Council imposed sanctions on Libyan authorities and authorized military action, including instituting a no-fly zone over Libya.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) took command of military operations, launching airstrikes and ultimately allowing opposition forces to take control of strategic areas, including Libya's capital, Tripoli. The TNC achieved international legitimacy in September 2011, and by October, Qaddafi was captured and killed. The TNC, however, struggled to establish a functional government after Qaddafi's regime fell, causing Libya to become fragmented under militia rule, leading to ongoing violence, displacement, and instability.

Syria (2011-2024)—A Prolonged and Devastating Conflict. Protests erupted in March 2011, when economic turmoil was met with state apathy and repression. As the protests gained traction, those in the streets demanded the end of Bashar al-Assad's government, whose family had been ruling Syria as an oppressive police state since 1971. These protests were met with a brutal crackdown. Unlike Libya, Assad survived the initial uprising, and the conflict morphed into a long, multi-sided civil war. The war led to mass displacement, with over 14 million Syrians forced to flee their homes by the time of Assad's ousting in 2024.

In Libya, decades of ethnic marginalization and labor migration were compounded by the 2011 civil war, leading to mass displacement and a prolonged period of instability. In Syria, Assad's use of forced displacement, sieges, and targeted attacks created the world's largest refugee crisis, with millions still unable to return home. While both regimes ultimately fell, Qaddafi's and Assad's legacies shaped the displacement landscape. This report examines key similarities between the two crises, analyzing how Libya's post-Qaddafi challenges can inform strategies for addressing displacement in post-Assad Syria

Libyan Displacement and Migration

In the years leading up to Muammar al-Qaddafi's [regime collapse](#) in October 2011, Libya had a complex relationship with displaced populations and migration. Prior to 2011, Libya was both a source and a transit hub for migration. Qaddafi's rule, marked by ethnic persecution and political repression, produced a lasting displacement crisis.

Libya as a Migration Hub

From the 1970s onward, Libya was a [destination and transit hub](#) for migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, driven by factors, such as settlement policies, conflict, and drought. Many [migrants sought employment](#) in Libya's construction and oil sectors, while others [arrived as refugees](#) from conflicts in West and Central Africa.

Libya's Pan-African policies under Qaddafi—such as the [Open-Door Migration Policy](#), the [United States of Africa](#) vision, [economic investments](#) in African countries, [regularization campaigns](#) for African Migrants, and active engagement in the African Union—especially after the [1992-2000 United Nations (UN) embargo](#), further encouraged sub-Saharan migration. Facing isolation from Arab states, Qaddafi welcomed African migrants, filling labor shortages in agriculture and construction. As the economy declined in parts of West and Central Africa and [conflicts persisted](#) in Sudan and the Horn of Africa, the number of individuals migrating to Libya increased significantly.

The situation for those fleeing conflict and persecution worsened when arriving in Libya due to a lack of protection and legal recognition. Before Qaddafi's death, Libya's legal framework [did not recognize](#) the existence of refugees on Libyan territory. Refugees fell under the category of economic migrants and were not provided international protection.

By the early 2000s, rising [anti-immigrant sentiment](#) led to violent clashes between Libyans and migrants. In response, the Libyan government implemented [harsh immigration restrictions](#), including mass deportations, arbitrary [detentions](#) in facilities with deplorable conditions, and physical abuse of migrants. From the early to mid-2000s, Libya [deported](#) tens of thousands of migrants.

Libya, once a destination for migrant workers, increasingly became a launching point for [migration](#) to Europe. Starting in 2003, European countries, particularly Italy, began [collaborating](#) with Libya to coordinate border patrol efforts between the two continents. In 2006, the European Union (EU), working closely with Libya, established a [framework](#) to manage migration flows and prevent African migrants from reaching Europe.

In 2010, leveraging migration as a political tool, Qaddafi threatened to flood Europe with migrants unless the EU [paid Libya billions](#) of euros to contain migration. Later that year, the EU and Libya agreed to a [migration cooperation agenda](#) that brought financial support to Libya in exchange for tighter border policies, detention efforts, and other migration controls.

Ethnic Persecution and Political Repression

The Imazighen (singular: Amazigh), also known as Berbers, and the Tebu faced decades of discrimination and displacement in Libya. Qaddafi's government banned Amazigh cultural identity, such as speaking Tamazight, the traditional Amazigh language, holding cultural celebrations, and giving children Amazigh names. Qaddafi's regime stripped the Tebu of citizenship, displaced them from their homes, and confiscated their lands, leading to mass internal displacement and statelessness. Many ethnic minorities in Libya remain stateless today.

Those who protested the regime including the Imazighen, Tebu, other minority groups, and political dissidents were swiftly arrested, expelled from their homes, or executed by the regime. Many political refugees during Qaddafi's regime fled to neighboring countries, like Tunisia and Egypt.

Leading up to Qaddafi's assassination in October 2011, Libya was already experiencing significant displacement due to migration, decades of repression, and Libya's first civil war that erupted in early 2011, protesting the regime. The conflict escalated humanitarian needs, with hundreds of thousands fleeing Libya or becoming internally displaced.

Fleeing Libya in 2011

During Libya's first civil war, many fled from Tripoli, Misrata, and Benghazi as Qaddafi's forces cracked down on protests. Nearly one million individuals, mostly migrant workers and their families, fled to neighboring countries, such as Tunisia and Egypt, as the war escalated. Refugee camps quickly overflowed as humanitarian agencies struggled to provide enough food and medical aid.

Internal Displacement in Libya 2011

More than half a million Libyans were internally displaced due to the conflict. As the conflict escalated and opposition forces advanced, the humanitarian response was weak; many cities saw food and medical supply shortages. Internally displaced civilians were often left without access to clean water, shelter, or healthcare. Many of those who remained in Libya faced racial violence, particularly Tuareg minorities and those who were seen as Black African migrants because they were perceived as being Qaddafi loyalists. Many were detained, attacked, or killed by anti-Qaddafi forces.

Immediate Aftermath Post-Qaddafi

After Qaddafi's fall in Libya, the country split into rival political factions, with militias and armed groups controlling different regions, often overshadowing official government authority that was elected in 2012. While some Libyans were able to return from abroad or from within the country to their places of origin, minority groups were unable or unwilling due to a fear of continued persecution. As the crisis in Libya deepened, long-term displacement became a reality for thousands.

Displacement in Libya Today

Libya continues to face a [complex displacement](#) crisis with both internally displaced persons (IDPs) and migrants. In 2024, there were nearly 150,000 [IDPs](#) in Libya due to conflict and floods. Libya also observed an increase in migrants that same year. International organizations estimate that more than [800,000 migrants](#) with various legal statuses resided in Libya in 2024. Vulnerable migrants—especially those fleeing protracted conflict in Sudan—continue to be at [risk](#) of arbitrary detention, violence, exploitation, and unsafe living conditions.

A UN-brokered [ceasefire](#) in 2020 led to the formation of a unified government, but progress remains slow. Libya's political and military forces exhibit a strong sense of [localism](#), with groups coalescing around specific cities, neighborhoods, or cultural identities, complicating national efforts to achieve unity. The failure to hold national elections in 2021 has widened division and heightened tensions between rival factions with lasting [negative effects](#) on displaced persons and migrants.

Syrian Displacement and Refugee Crisis

The Syrian displacement crisis is the world's [largest refugee crisis](#). The situation escalated during the [Syrian Civil War](#) (2011-2024), when millions were displaced internally and abroad due to war, repression, and economic collapse under Bashar al-Assad's rule.

Internal Displacement in Syria 2011-2024

During the civil war, nearly 7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) [lived in Syria](#), with most concentrated in northwestern Syria—Idlib, Aleppo, Hasakah, and Raqqa. Many IDPs [lived](#) in makeshift camps, bombed-out buildings, or government-controlled areas under heavy surveillance.

Assad's regime deliberately used [displacement as a weapon](#)—through sieges, [chemical attacks](#), and the [deliberate targeting](#) of civilian populations—to force civilians out of rebel areas. At the UN Security Council, Russia's [multi-year veto](#) of cross-border aid worsened the crisis, cutting off essential food and medical supplies to millions.

Syrian Refugees Abroad 2011-2024

More than [six million](#) Syrians fled the country during the civil war and sought asylum in over 130 countries, with the majority living in neighboring countries, such as Türkiye, Lebanon, and Jordan. By [mid-2024](#), more than three million Syrian refugees resided in Türkiye, approximately 1.5 million in Lebanon, and more than three-quarters of a million in [Jordan](#).

In Türkiye, refugees [faced](#) xenophobia and forced deportations. In Lebanon, refugees were subjected to [mass evictions](#) and crackdowns. Refugees in Jordan [faced](#) closed borders and insufficient humanitarian aid. With forced displacement at an all-time high, Syrian refugees faced [harsher asylum laws](#) in Europe.

Forced Returns Under Assad

The Assad regime pressured refugees to return with false promises of amnesty, jobs, and reconstruction. Upon arrival, returnees were subjected to arbitrary arrest, torture, forced conscription, or property confiscation. Others faced surveillance and intimidation, especially for former opposition supporters.

Current Day

On December 8, 2024, nearly 14 years after the start of the civil war, Assad fled Syria as opposition forces successfully liberated the country. Assad fled to Russia with his family, where he was offered asylum.

Even post-Assad, Syria remains one of the world's largest refugee crises, with more than 7.4 million Syrians internally displaced and more than six million Syrian refugees in neighboring countries. Just hours after Assad's ousting, many European countries announced they would stop processing asylum claims for Syrians and push for the rapid return of refugees, even though the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) urged in December 2024 that "States not forcibly return Syrian nationals" to any part of Syria. Rushing the return of millions of refugees would further strain Syria's transitional government and undermine prospects for successful repatriation.

By early February 2025, UNHCR estimated that nearly 300,000 Syrians had returned from neighboring countries since Assad's ousting. A regional survey on Syrian refugees' perceptions and intentions found that the vast majority hope to return to Syria one day, and one-quarter hope to return within 12 months. As of mid-March, an estimated 1.2 million Syrian IDPs and refugees have returned to their former homes and lands.

War remnants pose a significant threat to returning refugees and IDPs, with hundreds killed by unexploded landmines as they attempt to go home. "We cannot say that any area in Syria is safe from war remnants," said Mohammed Sami Al Mohammed, mine action program coordinator for the Syrian Civil Defence. An unstable government and ongoing conflict further complicate efforts to ensure a safe and dignified return for refugees and displaced persons.

Following Assad's ousting from Syria, the interim government pledged to deliver a democratic political transition. Ahmed al-Sharaa, Syria's interim president, announced efforts to establish a national dialogue on political transition through a one-day conference. Critics remain skeptical that a rushed, single-day conference with token representation of minority groups will create lasting change. And in the absence of a working constitution, Sharaa's government has adopted a temporary one for the five-year transition period, which has faced criticism from legal experts on potential human rights concerns.

Recently, Sharaa signed a deal to merge the Kurdish-led and U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) with new state institutions. The agreement comes at a critical moment as reports of civilian killings, military operations against remnants of Assad's regime, and sectarian violence threaten the

stability of Sharaa's fragile government. Foreign actors also play an undetermined role in the future of Syria as Israeli forces occupy southern Syria.

The EU and other donor governments pledged more than 5.8 billion euros in a donor drive to encourage a peaceful transition following the ousting of Assad. This year's donor event failed to meet the 7.5 billion euros raised in 2024 after the United States rolled back funding for foreign aid.

Key Similarities Between Libya and Syria

Despite their unique political and historical contexts, the conflicts in Libya and Syria share key similarities, particularly in how authoritarian rule, armed conflict, foreign intervention, and power fragmentation can lead to mass displacement.

Leadership Overthrown Through Armed Conflict—In both countries, leadership was overthrown through armed conflict and civil war. Qaddafi was ousted and killed after a NATO-backed uprising led by opposition forces. In Syria, Assad fled to Russia after opposition forces captured Damascus in December 2024.

Power Fragmentation and Foreign Intervention—Both conflicts saw heavy foreign involvement, with different international actors backing rival factions. In Libya, external powers like Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Russia, and Western nations supported different militias. In Syria, Russia and Iran backed Assad, while Turkey, the United States, and the Gulf states supported opposition forces aligned with their interests.

Both countries continue to experience power disputes as the result of a gaping political vacuum. After Qaddafi's fall in Libya, the country fragmented into rival political factions, with militias and armed groups controlling different regions, often overshadowing official government authority that was elected in 2012. A weak central government persists as the country's third national election post-Qaddafi was postponed indefinitely in December 2021.

Following Assad's ousting, Syria's interim government pledged a democratic transition, with Sharaa launching a one-day national dialogue—though critics doubt its effectiveness. Sharaa also signed a deal to integrate the Kurdish-led SDF into state institutions amid ongoing sectarian violence and instability. Foreign involvement remains a factor, with external Israeli forces still present in southern Syria.

Persecution of Minority Groups—Post-Qaddafi, Tuareg and other minorities who were seen as Qaddafi loyalists were persecuted by anti-Qaddafi forces. Similarly, in Syria, Alawite minority members are being targeted for their perceived ties to Assad.

Lessons from Libya and Next Steps for Syria

Power Fragmentation

The situation in Libya demonstrates the lasting impact of power fragmentation on continued displacement. More than a decade after Qaddafi fell in Libya, militias continue to threaten the successful reintegration of individuals who returned post-regime. In the months after Assad's ousting in Syria, instability and violence raise concerns about the long-term situation for refugees and displaced populations.

To avoid long-term displacement as in Libya, Syria needs a unified transitional government and continued financial and logistical support from the international community to allow for the successful return of displaced Syrians and sustainable reconstruction of the country for all its citizens.

Safe Pathways

Those who were deported to Libya from Europe under migratory agreements were subjected to inhumane conditions in detention centers. Additionally, Libya's instability post-Qaddafi prevented many displaced Libyans from returning home safely. Similarly, efforts to push refugees to return to Syria ignore ongoing security risks, instability, and potential human rights violations.

Syria and host countries should not rush the return of Syrian refugees. Doing so would add pressure on Syria's fragile transitional government. The transitional government must ensure that refugee definitions and protections are incorporated into new national frameworks.

International organizations must advocate for voluntary, safe, and dignified returns for Syrian refugees rather than expedited forced deportations from host countries. Long-term integration solutions in host countries should also be expanded.

International Neglect Worsens the Crisis

Libya's experience shows that without sustained international support, displacement crises can last for decades. After Qaddafi's fall, international attention on Libya and political will to resolve its crises faded, leaving unresolved displacement issues and worsening conditions for migrants.

Syria faces a similar risk, with competing headlines, reduced humanitarian aid from donor governments, and declining resettlement options despite ongoing global displacement. For Syrians, legal protections, security reforms, and sustainable solutions beyond temporary aid are essential to ensuring their safety and dignity.

Conclusion

The aftermath of Qaddafi's fall in Libya offers crucial lessons for supporting displaced populations in post-Assad Syria. A lack of coordinated governance, the proliferation of armed groups, and insufficient investment in reconstruction led to prolonged instability and displacement in Libya.

To avoid a similar fate, Syria's transition must prioritize inclusive governance, disarmament efforts, and sustainable reintegration programs for refugees and IDPs. Sustained international engagement, funding, and political pressure are critical to ensuring that Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons do not become a forgotten crisis.

All parties to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees should uphold their commitments to refugees and the principle of non-refoulement. Donor governments should also reprioritize foreign aid to support global stability, long-term reconstruction, and humanitarian response as a durable solution. A failure to learn from Libya's challenges risks perpetuating displacement and deepening Syria's fragility at a pivotal moment in its history.