

Syrian Civil War

4.12.17

CURRENT
CONTEXT

CALIFORNIA
history-social
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PROJECT CHSSP



Syria is now six years into a civil war that has killed over 400,000 people and displaced close to twelve million more. The conflict began in 2011 when the new president, Bashar al-Assad, responded harshly to pro-democracy protests and used the military to suppress ongoing demonstrations. The situation evolved into a complex, grueling war in which rebel forces seek Assad's removal, the Islamic jihadist group [Islamic State](#) also fights against the Syrian Army in a quest to expand its power in the region, and the government forces attack both of these groups. The reverberations of this war are felt across the globe, as [Syrian refugees](#) seek safety and opportunity elsewhere, and government councils and humanitarian groups consider how to respond. But of course, Syria itself has been the hardest hit by the war. Its economy has suffered tremendously, leading to rampant poverty and shortages of basic necessities such as clean water. Syrian youth have missed years-worth of schooling, while some have also faced forced labor and sex trafficking. Medical care is scarce, in part because of the high number of attacks against medical facilities and care providers. Compounding the intense suffering is the fact that humanitarian aid workers simply cannot reach a number of areas because of the warfare. President Assad has been accused of blocking aid to civilians in rebel-held regions of the country. By all measures, Syria remains in crisis.



A war-torn neighborhood in Syria.

Who's Fighting? The Pro-Assad Forces

The civil war involves multiple regional factions, and while it can largely be broken down into pro-Assad or anti-Assad forces, it is more complicated than this. Religion too, plays a part in this conflict. Aligned with Syrian President Assad (who is an Alawite, a branch of Islam affiliated with Shi'ism) are: Iran, a predominately Shia country, that has long used Syria to transfer weapons to its allies and proxies, such as neighboring Lebanon's militant group Hezbollah. Russia is another strong ally of Assad's, and gains strategic advantage through this alliance by being allowed to maintain a naval base on Syria's coastline.

Who's Fighting? The Anti-Assad Forces

The majority of Syria's Muslims are Sunni, as are the majority of the rebels who oppose the Shia-aligned Assad. Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and Jordan all back the anti-Assad rebels. But the situation is made even more complex because of additional Sunni combatants with their own war aims. The Islamic State and Al-Nusra Front (both deemed terrorist organizations by the United Nations Security Council) also oppose President Assad's government (Al-Nusra Front changed its name in 2016 to Jabhat Fateh al Sham). Though they all fight to topple Assad's government, these Sunni combatant groups and rebel groups have often fought each other as they vie for power and influence.

Who's Fighting? The Kurds

In addition to these other anti-Assad forces, Kurds (an ethnic group which inhabits a region of the Middle East that encompasses part of Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran) have long been denied basic rights in Syria, and stand opposed to Assad's government. Kurds seek independence or greater autonomy, and have defended their region against the Islamic State, which has battled to expand its area of control across the Syria and Iraq borders.

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Syrian refugee camp near the Turkish border.

International Military Involvement

The Syrian Civil war also involves powers from outside the region, bringing international conflicts to the fore (such as between the U.S. and Russia). In late 2014 a U.S.-led coalition involving UK, France and many Middle Eastern countries, began air strikes against the Islamic State. This coalition also provided backing for the Kurds as they fought against the encroachment of the Islamic State. U.S. involvement has been primarily limited to air strikes, as President Obama chose not to send U.S. troops to fight on the ground in Syria. Obama did declare a “red line” over which he would use military force if Assad deployed chemical weapons against his citizens, but even after Assad defied the warning in 2013 and used poison gas in a rebel area, Obama and Congress did not move forward with force against Assad’s military. While debates in the U.S. continued, Russia helped negotiate a deal to dismantle Syria’s chemical weapons and discourage U.S. military intervention. Some argue that the lack of U.S. military engagement in Syria emboldened Russia to escalate its military involvement in support of Assad’s war objectives. In late 2015, Russia began air strikes against the Islamic State and rebel group targets. Approximately 10,000 Russian soldiers are fighting in Syria today to support the Syrian government and target the Islamic State. Several hundred U.S. military personnel are also in Syria to oppose the Islamic State.



Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (left) and Russian President Vladimir Putin meeting in Moscow, 2015.

Where It Stands Today

Today the balance of power is tipping toward Assad and his government forces. In December 2016, the Syrian Army recaptured Aleppo, a region held by rebels for the past four years. Anti-Assad forces have not surrendered, however, and were struck again in April 2017 with chemical weapons. Assad did not claim authority for this attack, which is labeled a war crime by the international community, but much of the world holds Assad responsible. In response, President Trump ordered an air attack against the Syrian government airbase from which the chemical attack was launched. This was a surprise move, as Trump had criticized Obama for getting involved in the Syrian Civil War, and had in his 2016 campaign suggested that overthrowing Assad may bring something even worse to the fore in Syria. It is unclear how Trump will continue to respond (or not) to the violence in Syria, and whether the U.S. Congress will support involvement in Syria (Trump did not seek Congressional approval for the airstrike). Meanwhile, Russia has labeled the airstrike an “act of aggression,” indicating further strain on the already tense U.S.-Russia relationship. In Syria, anti-Assad forces continue to fight because they believe that peace will not come as long as Assad remains in power. Assad and his military appear to be willing to hold onto power at all costs. Forces within and outside of Syria continue to provoke or retaliate, which makes it unlikely that the brutal war will end soon.

-Shelley Brooks, Ph.D., CHSSP Statewide Office

[Click here](#) to read the April 2016 issue on the Syrian Civil War

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A brief timeline for the war in Syria:

May 2011 – Syrian President Assad begins using military force to repress domestic protests.

October 2011 – Opposition group forms, called the New Syrian National Council, and includes exiled activists

November 2011 – The opposition Free Syrian Army attacks a Syrian military base near Damascus, one of several rebel-led attacks to come.

August 2012 – U.N. accuses Syria of war crimes in a May government attack that killed more than 100 civilians, roughly half of whom were children.

March 2013 – The U.S. and Britain promise non-military aid to the rebels.

April 2013 – Britain and France inform U.N. that it appears that the Syrian government has used chemical weapons against rebel forces. Later U.S. report concludes that the attack killed nearly 1,500 people. The Syrian government denies use of chemical weapons.

April 2013 – ISIS/Islamic State forms, out of al-Qaeda in Iraq. Before long, Islamic State declares a “caliphate” that stretches across parts of Syria and Iraq where they have military advantage.

January/February 2014 – Peace talks brokered by the United Nations fail. Syrian government is unwilling to discuss a transitional government.

June – Jul 2014 – ISIS/Islamic State captures Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city, takes over additional cities in addition to oil field holdings in Iraq and Syria, and

controls main border crossing between Iraq and Jordan. ISIL declares an Islamic caliphate, renaming itself Islamic State.

September 2014 – A U.S. led coalition begins air strikes against Islamic State in Syria.

September 2015 – After a series of successes for Islamic State and rebels, Russia steps in to back Assad’s government with air strikes.

February 2016 – “Cessation of hostilities” agreed to by Syrian government and major rebel groups as government forces push hard to seize Aleppo from rebels. Islamic State and the Nusra Front not included.

March 2016 – Syrian government, with the aid of Russian air strikes, retake the city of Palmyra from Islamic State.

April 2016 – Parliamentary elections held in government-controlled areas of Syria.

April 2016 – UN Envoy-led peace talks between rebel groups and Syrian government.

September 2016 - The Syrian government conducts 200 airstrikes in a weekend against Aleppo to weaken rebel forces.

December 2016 - Rebel-held Aleppo falls to Assad’s forces.

April 2017 - A chemical attack on a rebel-held town is attributed to Assad. President Trump retaliated by bombing the Syrian airbase that launched the planes carrying the chemical weapons.

Timeline developed from the *BBC*, *CNN*, and *The Washington Post*. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703995>, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/08/27/world/meast/syria-civil-war-fast-facts/>, & <https://www.washingtonpost.com/apps/g/page/world/timeline-unrest-in-syria/207/>

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Visual

Territorial control in Syria is in flux, but there are a few general statements that can be made about the current status of the war. Assad's government forces control much of the western part of the country, though there are rebel-held pockets surrounding Damascus. Rebels' greatest territorial holdings are in the region of Aleppo, though the Syrian Army recaptured much of this region in December 2016. Kurdish forces hold swaths of territory across the northern border of Syria. The Islamic State controls areas in eastern and northern Syria, though large areas of the less populated areas of eastern Syria are not under the full control of any particular group. (You may want to search for a war map of Syria to see details. One from April 2017 can be found here: <https://syria.liveuamap.com/>)



Map from CIA World Factbook <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>

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CHSSP Teaching Blog: *Charting the War in Syria* <http://chssp.ucdavis.edu/blog/charting-the-war-in-syria/>

Additional Resources*

News

- ALJAZEERA: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/syria-civil-war-explained-160505084119966.html>
- VOX: <http://www.vox.com/2017/4/8/15218782/syria-trump-bomb-assad-explainer>
- National Review: <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/446583/syrian-civil-war-gas-attacks-not-netflix-series-lets-pay-attention-long-term>
- New York Times, editorial: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/10/opinion/on-syria-an-administration-in-disagreement-with-itself.html?em_pos=small&emc=edit_ty_20170411&nl=opinion-today&nl_art=0&nid=72576062&ref=headline&te=1
- The Washington Post, editorial: https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/04/09/what-could-go-wrong-for-the-u-s-in-syria-war-with-russia/?utm_term=.3a1cf49f9bca
- Map: <https://syria.liveuamap.com/>

Overview

- BBC: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26116868> & <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-841ebc3a-1be9-493b-8800-2c04890e8fc9> & <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-17258397>
- CNN: <http://www.cnn.com/2013/08/27/world/meast/syria-civil-war-fast-facts/>
- Stanford University: <https://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/>
- Pew Forum: <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/>
- CIA: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>
- Council on Foreign Relations: <http://www.cfr.org/lebanon/hezbollah-k-hizbollah-hizbullah/p9155> & <http://www.cfr.org/iraq/islamic-state/p14811> & <http://www.cfr.org/global/global-conflict-tracker/p32137#!/conflict/civil-war-in-syria> & http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/sunni-shia-divide/p33176#!/?cid=otr-marketing_url-sunni_shia_infoguide
- <http://www.cfr.org/global/global-conflict-tracker/p32137#!/conflict/civil-war-in-syria>

*The resources listed above are provided for further research and do not imply an endorsement by the California History-Social Science Project or the University of California.

Images on pages 1 & 2: Neighborhood: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Azaz_Syria_during_the_Syrian_Civil_War_Missing_front_of_House.jpg

Middle East Map: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Middle_East.png. Assad and Putin: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50533>. Refugee camp: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Syrian_refugee_camp_on_theTurkish_border.jpg