

Syrian Civil War



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The country of Syria is now five years into a civil war, with hundreds of thousands dead and many millions of refugees and displaced persons. What began as a civil protest against President Bashar al-Assad's government in 2011, quickly descended into a complex, grueling war in which rebel forces seek Assad's removal, the Islamic jihadist group [Islamic State](#) seeks power in the region, the government forces attack both of these groups, and fighters on all sides commit war crimes. The reverberations of this war are felt across the globe, as [Syrian refugees](#) seek safety and opportunity elsewhere, and government councils and humanitarian groups seek to respond. But of course, Syria itself has been the hardest hit by the war. Its economy has suffered tremendously, with approximately 50% of the working population unemployed. Around 40% of school-aged children in Syria do not go to school. 80% of the population lives in poverty. 70% do not have adequate access to clean water. Children have been subject to forced labor (including military service) and left vulnerable to sex trafficking. Medical care is scarce, in part because of the high number of attacks against medical facilities and care providers. Limited food supplies have triggered enormous price hikes in the cost of staples such as flour, rice, eggs, and milk. Compounding the intense suffering is the fact that humanitarian workers (like Doctors without Borders, among many others) 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 is in crisis.

The civil war involves multiple factions, and while it can largely be broken down into pro-Assad or anti-Assad forces with distinct political goals, it is more complicated than this. Religion too, plays a part in this conflict. Aligned with Syrian President Assad (who is an Alawite affiliated with Shi'ism) are: Iran (a predominately Shia country), Russia, and Lebanon's Shia political party and the militant group Hezbollah. The majority of the world's (and Syria's) Muslims, however, are Sunni. Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and Jordan all back the anti-Assad rebels (most of whom are Sunnis). But the situation is made 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) oppose President Assad's government. But these two groups have also been in conflict with one another, and the Islamic State has brutalized some rebel groups that resent the Islamic State's quest for power in Syria. In addition, Kurds (an ethnic group which inhabits a region of the Middle East that encompasses northern Syria) oppose not only Assad, but also the Islamic State and Al-Nusra Front. The 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 (which includes the UK, France and many Middle Eastern countries) began air strikes against the Islamic State. President Obama has made clear that he does not intend for the strikes to support Assad (Obama called for Assad to step down as early as August 2011), but the U.S. has also been reluctant to provide much weaponry to the rebels for fear of this war materiel ending up in the hands of extremists. In late 2015, Russia entered the fray to support Assad with air strikes against the Islamic State, though it appears that many Russian strikes have harmed rebel groups.

After years of war no single faction or alliance has been able to claim military victory in Syria. The United Nations has repeatedly weighed in on the crisis in hopes of brokering peace, ending the suffering in Syria, and stemming the tide of Syrian refugees. In December 2015 the UN Security Council passed a resolution highlighting the need for "credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance" in Syria, complete with a new constitution and free and fair elections (monitored by the UN) in which all Syrians may participate. In short, the UN calls for a transition government that will look different than Syria's current administration. In February 2016 the U.S. and Russia led a negotiation between the Syrian government and the opposition forces that resulted in a "cessation of hostilities," or a partial truce. The Islamic State and Al-Nusra Front were not invited to the negotiating table because of their terrorist designations. Perhaps not surprisingly, these two latter groups have not felt bound to observe the cessation of fire. And though the death toll dropped in the weeks following the agreement, the Syrian government and rebels have engaged in an increasing number of violent clashes in recent weeks. As fears of a failed agreement spread, the Syrian government and rebels remain skeptical about a basis for peace because of fundamentally different ideas about Syria's future. Assad and his allies believe he can and should retain a position of authority in the country. The opposition insists that there can be no peace as long as Assad remains in office. This crucial difference continues to propel the war (as it has for years) and will require some sort of resolution in order to bring peace to Syria.

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

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A recent 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.

Timeline developed from the *BBC* and *The Washington Post*. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703995> & <https://www.washingtonpost.com/apps/g/page/world/timeline-unrest-in-syria/207/>

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Visual

Territorial control in Syria is constantly 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 south of Hama, though there are rebel-held pockets surrounding Damascus. Rebels' greatest territorial holdings are in the region of Aleppo. 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, though current ones are difficult to find. [Here is a link](#) to one from February 2016).



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

- New York Times: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/13/world/middleeast/syria-cease-fire-assad-civil-war-us-un.html>
- The Wall Street Journal: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/islamist-rebel-groups-press-offensive-in-northern-syria-1459779046>
- The New Yorker: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/04/18/bashar-al-assads-war-crimes-exposed>
- PBS: <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/gathering-evidence-of-syria-war-crimes-in-the-assad-files/>
- U.S. News and World Report: <http://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2016-04-13/the-latest-shells-fired-from-syria-reportedly-hit-turkey>

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

*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.