



Syria Fact Sheet

Government

The Syrian Arab Republic has for decades been ruled by the Assad family. Hafiz Assad ruled Syria from 1971-2000. In 2000, his son Bashar Assad succeeded him. The Syrian regime is considered a military regime, and Bashar Assad has continued his father's autocratic rule. Bashar Assad represents the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, Ba'ath meaning "resurrection" in Arabic. This is the same party of former dictator Saddam Hussein of Iraq. The Ba'athists hold a pan-Arab ideology which originally sought to unite all Arabs together in a socialist and revolutionary Arab nation, while usually discriminating against non-Arabs like the Kurds, the Jews, etc.

Syrian Ethnic and Religious Groups

- **Alawites (Shias):** Assad has ruled in favor of his own Alawite community, about 12% of pre-War Syrians. The Alawites are a [branch](#) of Islam who [affiliate](#) with the Shia sect. The Alawites have ruled Syria since Hafiz Assad took over the country in 1971.
- **Other Shias:** Iran [has been settling](#) Shias from Iraq and other nations into areas controlled by Assad. The numbers of Shia in Syria [may now exceed](#) 500,000.
- **Sunnis:** The largest group in Syria are the Sunni Arab Muslims, over 70% of the country's pre-War population. They have been at the heart of the original protests, and now, the rebellion against Assad.
- **The Kurds:** There are an [estimated](#) 2 million Kurds living in the northern region of Syria, which the Kurds call Rojava (West-Kurdistan). Most Kurds are Sunni Muslim. The Kurds in Syria have faced [systematic repression](#) and discrimination. There are still 300,000 stateless Kurds in Syria. Before 2011, Syrian Kurds were not allowed to use the Kurdish language.
- **The Christians:** The Christian population made up about 10% of Syria's pre-War population. They tend to support Assad because of the dangers facing them from the mostly jihadist Sunni rebel groups.
- **The Druze:** The Druze are an ethnoreligious group who constitute about 3% of the pre-War population of Syria, from 500,000-700,000 persons. The Druze are concentrated in the mountainous areas around Damascus. The area is called Jabal al-Arab or Jabal al-Druze. They tend to support Assad.

Failed Arab Spring in Syria

The civil war in Syria began in 2011 after peaceful demonstrations turned violent in Deraa, which is located in southern region. Assad's forces opened fired on the protestors, which led to mass protests across the country. Protestors, labeled as "terrorists" and "armed criminal gangs" by the Assad regime, were forced to defend themselves. Assad quickly attempted to implement some "reform," allowing Kurds to be "citizens" of Syria, and removing his nationalist Ba'ath party as the ["leader of the state and society."](#) These changes did nothing to calm the tension, as protestors continued to call for the removal of Assad. Full civil war then erupted.

2019 Civil War Situation in Syria

It is the 8th year of the civil war in Syria. Much of Syria has been reconquered by Assad, with the help of Iran and Russia. Iranian troops, backed by Hezbollah and other foreign Shia militias, have supported Assad throughout the conflict, by providing military advisors, weapons, lines of credit and [oil transfers](#). Russia has provided air cover, and arms and equipment. In 2017, Russia [agreed to deals](#) with Assad that will allow Russia to keep its air and naval bases in Syria. Russia has been blamed by many observers for bombing civilians to support Assad. These bombings often include the use of [bunker buster bombs](#), [thermobaric](#) bombs,

incendiary munitions, and cluster bombs. Russia has [also deployed](#) advanced anti-missile systems to Syria – the S-300s in Tartus and the S-400s in Latakia – even though neither is needed to fight the ISIS or al-Qaeda.

The Kurds have been the most moderate forces in Syria. Originally, they forged an alliance with some Sunni Arabs and Christians in the northeast region to set up an autonomous territory, under the name of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) and its military wing, the Syrian Defense Forces (SDF). The U.S. also allied with them, and stationed U.S. troops in their territories. However, after U.S. troops were removed from much of the area, Turkey attacked the SDF, [forcing them to ally](#) and accept the authority of Assad.

Turkey has militarily intervened multiple times in Syria, usually [aiming](#) to squash Kurdish gains. First it conquered some small border areas. Then it [conquered Afrin](#). Turks killed at least 10,000 Kurds, and drove out 180,000 more, and is replacing them with Sunni Arabs and [Turkmen](#) from Syria. 78 Turkish soldiers [were killed](#) in Afrin, along with 437 Turkey-aligned Syrian Sunni rebels. The Turks [put](#) a jihadist group in charge. The Turks and their allies [have been accused](#) of ethnic cleansing and, in some cases, of [massacring](#) Christians and Yazidis. Turkey later [attacked](#) along the entire border with SDF controlled territory to establish a “safe zone” free of Kurdish fighters about twenty miles wide. This [attack has killed and wounded](#) hundreds, and prompted from [180,00](#) to [300,000](#) civilians to flee their homes or shelters, including 80,000 children. Turkey [claims](#) that 440 Kurdish fighters have been killed since the operation, while the SDF has said 56 of its fighters have died. Turkey also said four of its soldiers were killed, along with 16 allied Syrian fighters. Turkey [has relied](#) on the Islamist fighters it controls in Syria, renamed the Syrian National Army, which have been accused of war crimes. Turkey [has also fought](#) troops from the Assad regime. Turkey [hopes to repopulate](#) this area with Syrian Sunni Arabs who are refugees in Turkey, and to take control of [Syrian oil](#). Turkey [has begun to deport](#) Syrian refugees to the areas of Syria it controls. Eventually, Turkey [negotiated](#) a cease fire with Russia, splitting control of the safe zone area with the Russians and the Assad regime, with the SDF pushed back from all Turkish border areas. Turkey [has demanded](#) that the U.S. turn over the SDF commander, Mazloum Abdi.

The Assad forces and their allies have been [gaining ground](#) against rebel forces in Idlib. The [dominant faction](#) is Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. Turkey has been supportive of the Idlib rebels, and negotiated a temporary truce between them and Assad. But since the truce ended, more than 860 civilians, more than 1,400 insurgents and over 1,200 pro-regime forces have been killed since April. 400,000 civilians have been displaced.

Important Points

- In Oct. 2019, the U.S. [killed](#) Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the caliph of the Islamic State, in Idlib near the border controlled by Turkey. The SDF [provided](#) crucial information that enabled him to be discovered. Al-Baghdadi was in territory controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. HTS [was also looking](#) for him.
- In the North, the Turks and their allies [have conquered](#) areas including al-Bab, Afrin and [other border areas](#). The Turks and their allies have focused on fighting the SDF, not ISIS, and [have not carried out](#) any operations targeting al Qaeda-affiliated groups since 2014.
- Iran [has established](#) a “land bridge” or “Shiite Crescent” from Iran through northern Iraq into Syria and Lebanon, to enable the Iran-led regional alliance to transport fighters and weaponry in both directions. However, Iran [aspires](#) to gain the ability to direct more militiamen and supplies to Syria through SDF controlled areas to accelerate their military buildup inside the country. The Iranians [are also establishing](#) their own military bases across this country, including in southern Syria to threaten Israel.
- There [are tensions](#) between Assad’s principal backers, Iran and Russia. Russia would like all Syria under the regime’s direct authority. Iran is intent on preserving alternative instruments of power that run parallel to the state. Putin [has privately said](#) that he does not want Syria to become a “Persian colony.” Publicly [he has called](#) for all foreign troops to leave Syria. Forces aligned with the Iranians and forces aligned with the Russians [have clashed](#).
- Israel [has often targeted](#) for destruction Iranian forces and bases in southern Syria. Israel has articulated a set of red lines: Iran transferring, via Syria, to Hezbollah of game-changing weapons, specifically

precision-guided missiles; and any attempt to open a new front in terrorist operations along the Golan Line of Separation. Israel has also demanded that Iranian forces and the Shiite militias [be a](#) distance of 60-70 kilometers from the border with Israel and Jordan.

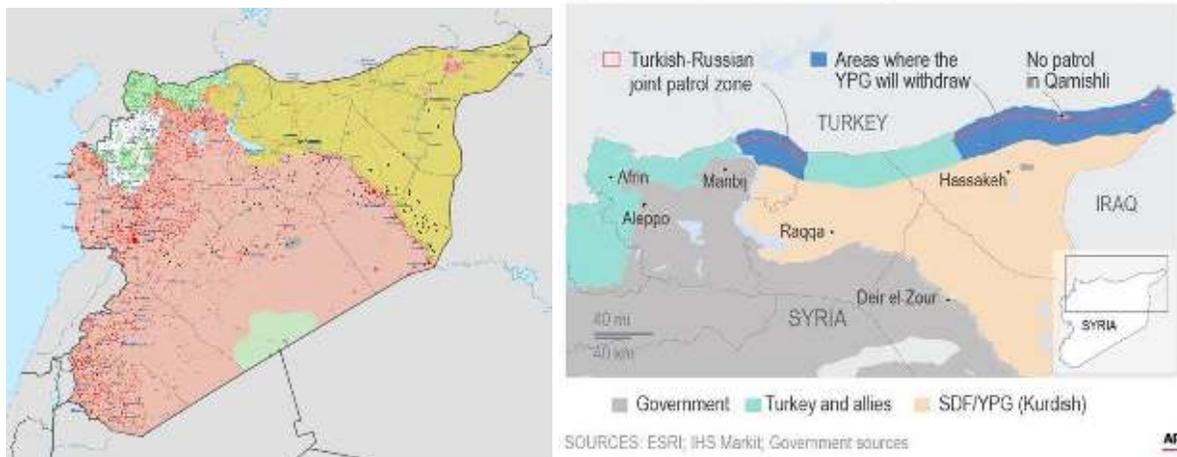
- Russia [has delivered](#) an S-300 surface-to-air missile system to Assad in Syria. The system [has a radius](#) of some 200 kilometers, meaning a battery placed near Damascus would cover much of Israel.

Syrian Territories

- The Assad regime and its Russian and Iranian and other allies control [more than two-thirds](#) of Syria, including the Western coast, Damascus, and Syria’s three largest cities, and 10 of its 14 provincial capitals. They [control](#) about 2/3rds of the population. More recently, the SDF [has recognized](#) Assad’s sovereignty over their territory, and Assad forces have been [gaining ground](#) against rebel forces in Idlib.
- The SDC has set up their Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, which holds [about 28%](#) of Syria, and [has about 4 million people](#), a majority of which are not Kurdish. The SDC controls the Omar oil field, Syria’s largest oil facility, which gives them control of “one of Syria’s most important economic arteries to Syria” that is essential to “reconstruction.” Before Syria’s 2011 civil war, Syria [had](#) a lucrative oil industry, pumping about 400,000 barrels a day. The U.S. has [provided](#) arms and supplies to the Kurds, and then the SDF, although Turkey has objected. The SDC has [a good record](#) of respecting the rights of minorities in the region. A constitution was [finalized](#) by 2016, and elections [have been held](#). A [system of justice](#) has even been set up. This federation is not meant to serve as a Kurdish state; the SDC is in favor of a federal system in Syria. After the U.S. removed the troops from their region in October 2019, the SDC [negotiated a deal](#) with Assad, allowing his forces to replace the SDF in the border regions next to Turkey, and recognizing his sovereignty over their areas. The SDF also [may have agreed](#) to have its troops join the Syrian Army, which is desperate for new soldiers.
- Turkey [controls](#) more than 4,000 square kilometers (1,500 square miles) of Syrian territory; around 600,000 people live in the enclave, most of them displaced from elsewhere in Syria. It also [has influence over](#) Idlib, the last area dominated by non-SDF Syrian rebels. There are an estimated [2.5 to 3.3 million](#) people – at least [1.2 million](#) of whom are internally displaced – currently crammed into Idlib. Turkey maintains 12 military [“observation points”](#) in the province. The Turks also [have paid](#) the wages, provided logistical support, and provided weapons to some of those fighters.

Russian-Turkish agreement for northeast Syria

Starting at noon, Oct. 23, Russian and Syrian government forces will enter the Syrian side of the Turkish border following the withdrawal of Kurdish forces.



Assad – Pink
 SDF – Yellow
 Dark Green – Turkey
 Green & White – Idlib
 Light Green – U.S. troops in Al Tanf

Military Strength

- **Assad regime:**
 - The war has taken a toll on the Syrian army, which may have only [10,000-20,000 deployable troops](#).
 - There are also [100,000-150,000 soldiers](#). Many are poorly trained conscripts and volunteers, as well as militia auxiliaries responsible for local security. They cannot be relied on outside their home regions.
- **Iran** brought Shia fighters into Syria. Iran has stated its intention to help Assad retake all of Syria. Iran [pays](#) for its own troops, the Shia fighters, and some Syrian groups. [1000 Iranian IRGC troops](#) have died.
 - Iranian sponsored forces fighting number [roughly 80,000 fighters](#), less than 10% Iranian, and the rest including Lebanese Hezbollah, Shia Iraqis, Shia Afghanis, and Shia Pakistanis. The three main forces [are](#): the Iraqi al-Nujaba; the Afghan Fatemiyoun, and the Pakistani Zainebiyoun.
 - Iran [has started](#) to build naval, air, and land bases in Syria.
 - Iran helped [create](#) Alawite militias, named the National Defense Forces, of up to 100,000 men, and [two other militias](#), the Desert Hawks, in the northern port city of Latakia, and the Tiger Forces from Hama, who are now client forces of Russia. Each of whom have between 3,000 - 6,000 fighters.
 - Iran is [seeking](#) to develop a Syrian Hezbollah of tens of thousands of Syrian men.
- **Russia** [officially acknowledges](#) that there are more than 300 military police Syria; unofficially, it may [have](#) more than 4000. *Key News* [has estimated](#) 500 to 600 Russians have died in Syria, compared with the official casualty count of 19. Russia has deployed planes [including](#) Su-24 and Su-34 frontline bombers to [Latakia](#), Syria. Russia has deployed a naval force in Syria, with a carrier. Russia has deployed the S-300 and S-400 missile systems to its [Hemeimeem air base](#) in Latakia and its Tartus naval base, which [it is expanding](#), to include nuclear ships.
- **ISIS** – Around 12,000 ISIS fighters [are being held](#) in Syria, 4500 of them foreigners. Yet there are an estimated [15,000 ISIS fighters](#) still at large in Syria and Iraq. If the U.S. removes its troops, a Pentagon draft report [is concerned](#) that ISIS may reclaim territory. ISIS has a war chest of as much [as \\$400 million](#).
- **The Kurds/ The SDF** –The [70,000 Kurdish forces](#) are called the YPG (People’s Protection Unit) and the YPJ (Women).Some of these are part of the SDF forces.
 - The SDF [has about](#) 100,000 troops. This includes Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen & Christian Assyrians.
 - The SDF commander in chief is [Mazloun Kobani](#).
 - The SDF [has had](#) 11,000 of its fighters were killed, 24,000 were wounded, and many thousands of civilians killed or driven from their homes.
- **The U.S. is withdrawing most of its 1000 plus troops in Syria.** As many as [500 troops](#) will remain in SDF territory, guarding the oil fields, while [about 150](#) will remain at al-Tanf near the Jordanian border.
- **The Turks & their allies** –[Over a thousand](#) Turkish troops and [possibly 100,000](#) allied Syrian fighters called the National Liberation Front in Turkish controlled areas.
 - Most of the Syrian fighters are radicals [with ISIS](#) or [other groups](#).
 - Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (the former al-Qaeda franchise in Syria) [controls](#) Idlib and neighboring areas. HTS has about 20,000 fighters. They [set up](#) the Salvation Government. The head of the Salvation Government is Fawaz Hilal, but the region’s strongman is HTS chief Abu Mohammed al-Jolani. Turkey [has supported](#) HTS.
 - Hurras al-Din, the new al-Qaeda affiliate, is a splinter faction of HTS.

Humanitarian Crisis

In 2011, the population of Syria [was numbered](#) at 22 million. The civil war [has driven](#) some 5.6 million people out of the country and displaced around 6.6 million within its borders. 80% of Syrians [are living](#) in poverty, almost 60% are unemployed, and about half the children do not attend school. This great migration has destabilized the Middle East and Europe. [Half a million people](#) have been killed; [about](#) 85% of the dead were civilians killed by the forces of the Syrian government and its allies. Assad is [cracking down](#) in the areas he controls, and he and the Iranians have been [brutal to their opponents](#). They have been also repopulating their areas with Shia Muslims from Iraq and Afghanistan, and [even from Lebanon and Iran](#). The UN [estimates](#) that it will cost \$400 billion to rebuild Syria. One American citizen [has been executed](#) by the Assad forces.

For more information please contact: EMET/ 202.601.7422/ Info@emetonline.org/ www.emetonline.org