



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 Syrians. The Alawites are a [minority branch](#) of Islam who [affiliate](#) with the Shia sect. They also are a minority group within Syria. 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. Under the ruling of both Hafiz and Bashar Assad, 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 are believed to 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.

2018 Civil War Situation in Syria

In its seventh year, the Syrian civil war has turned Syria into another failed state in the Middle East. There are essentially multiple, separate civil wars going on in Syria. These include: Pro-Assad forces vs. Sunni extremists; Pro-Assad forces vs. the SDF/Kurds and their allies; Turks and their allies vs. the Kurds and their allies, and occasionally Sunni extremist groups vs. Sunni extremist groups. There are also numerous outside players involved: Russia, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the other Gulf States, and the U.S.

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](#). Saudi Arabia, and other Sunni Gulf States, wants to remove Assad from power and replace the regime with a Sunni Arab group. This is largely due to the Sunni-Shiite (Iran-S. Arabia) rivalry between the two states.

On September 30, 2015 the Russians started their own campaign in Syria in favor of Assad. Russia was already supporting the Syrian regime with arms and equipment. Russia seeks to secure its only military bases in the Middle East. In 2017, they [agreed to deals](#) with Assad 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. [According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#), roughly 10,000 civilians have been killed by Russian airstrikes since their campaign began. 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.

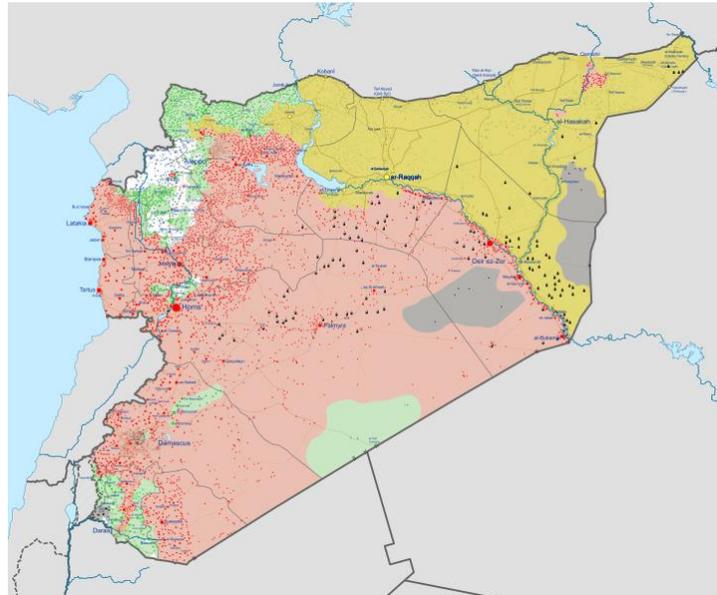
The Kurds have been the most moderate and the most successful forces in Syria. They have carved out territory in the northern region, organized into 3 cantons (Jazira, Kobani, and Afrin). The Syrian Kurds are led by the moderate leftist Democratic Union Party (PYD), co-Chaired by Salih Muslim, which is an offshoot of, but separate from, the PKK in Turkey. The U.S. has [provided](#) arms and supplies to the Kurds and its allies, although Turkey has objected. In 2015, the Kurds helped [organize](#) a coalition of Kurdish and Arab fighting factions into the Syria Democratic Forces (SDF). The Kurds have [a good record](#) of respecting the rights of minorities in the region. The SDF political wing, the [Syrian Democratic Council](#), [announced](#) a “Democratic Federal System for Rojava - Northern Syria.” A constitution was [finalized](#) by August 2016. [Abdul Karim Saroukhan](#) is the head of the Kurdish-led administration. Elections [have been held](#). This federation is not meant to serve as a Kurdish state; the SDC is in favor of a federal system in Syria.

Turkey has militarily intervened in Syria, [largely aiming](#) to squash Kurdish gains. Turkey fears that if Kurds create a de facto state in Syria, then it would lead its own 20 million Kurds to do the same. The mission, dubbed ‘[Operation Euphrates Shield](#),’ has used as ground troops some elements of what were once part of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Many of the FSA units supporting Turkey are composed of Jihadists. These [FSA](#) troops have been witnessed chanting “Death to America.” This intervention has resulted in a small zone of Turkish control, but the Turk forces and their allies have had [problems](#) expanding their authority, [partly](#) because of the weakness of their own troops and their rebel allies, and also because of the [unwillingness](#) of the U.S. and Russia to allow them to do so. In January 20, 2018, after threatening the Afrin area, the Turks [began a ground assault](#) called “Operation Olive Branch.” Afrin is home to 1.2 million people, a majority Kurdish, but also a sizable number of other Syrians who fled to the area to avoid the violence. The Turks are using their own troops and [their jihadi rebel allies](#). Russia [has allowed them](#) to bomb Afrin, and they have done so, killing and wounding civilians as well as Kurdish fighters. (Note that the SDF is not in Afrin; the fighters there are exclusively Kurdish.) The Turks [have threatened](#) to invade all along to the Iraqi border against the Kurds, which could result in Turkish attacks on U.S. forces stationed in the SDF. The region of Afrin is predominantly Kurdish with other ethnic and religious minorities which include Arabs, Armenians, Kurdish Yezedis, Christians. Afrin was known to be the weakest point of the Kurdish held territory largely because it is isolated from the rest of the Kurdish region in Syria and also as there is no U.S. presence inside the enclave. The Turks [eventually seized](#) the main city in Afrin, [killing](#) 1500 Kurdish fighters, and displacing 200,000 people. The Turks and their allies [have been accused](#) of ethnic cleansing and, in some cases, of [massacring](#) Christians and Yazidis. This fighting [has delayed](#) the campaign against ISIS.

Important Points

- In the North, the Turks and their allies [have conquered](#) areas including al-Bab and Afrin.
- 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. The Iranians are also [building](#) a permanent military base in Syria, close to Damascus.

- 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.



- Controlled by the [Syrian Arab Republic \(Assad\)](#)
- Controlled by the [North Syria Federation \(SDF\)](#)
- Controlled by the [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant \(ISIL\)](#)
- Controlled by the [Syrian Opposition \(FSA, JI and AS\)](#)
- Controlled by the [Turkish forces and TFSA](#)
- Controlled by [Tahrir al-Sham \(HTS\)](#)

U.S. Articulated Goals in Syria

The United States’ goals in Syria are: to negotiate a settlement to end the war, and defeat ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliated groups. The U.S. is currently working with both Erdogan and the Kurds/SDF.

Military Strength

Pro-Assad Forces – they control [more than 60%](#) 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.

- The war [has taken](#) a toll on the Syrian army, which may have only [20,000-25,000](#) deployable troops.
- Overall, between [150,000 and 200,000](#) fighters are fighting for Assad. Senior U.S. officials believe that [80 percent](#) of Assad’s military manpower is made up of foreign forces.
- 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.
 - Israel [has provided evidence](#) that Iranian sponsored forces fighting number 82,000 fighters, including 3,000 members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, 9,000 members of Hezbollah and 10,000 members of Shia militias. In addition, Iran “directly commands” 60,000 local Syrian fighters. Other estimates are even higher - [10,000-20,000-50,000-90,000](#) Shia troops into Syria: up to 10,000 fighters from Hezbollah; about 20,000 Iraqis from the PMF militias; 15,000-20,000 Afghans, [organized](#) into the Liwa Fatemiyoun militia; and 5000-7000 Pakistanis, [organized](#) into the Zainabiyoun brigade.
 - 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, headquartered in the northern port city of Latakia, and the Tiger Forces from Hama, 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 insists it has no troops in Syria; unofficially, it may [have](#) more than 4000. *Skay 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.

- China [has become involved](#) in Syria, providing aid and training and [even elite troops](#) to pro-Assad forces. This is because 5,000 ethnic Uyghurs Sunni jihadists separatists from China's Xinjiang province are in Syria, fighting for ISIS or al-Qaeda or other Sunni Islamist organizations.

Non-ISIS Sunni Arab Rebel Groups – Many of these fighters are jihadist groups, although some moderates remain. [Parts](#) of the Idlib province in the North are controlled by them. They tend to ally with Turkey.

- Ahrar al-Sham [is](#) a Sunni Islamist group that aims to replace the Assad Regime with an Islamic government. Ahrar al-Sham has about 20,000 fighters.
- Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, a coalition dominated by Fatah al-Sham is a Sunni Islamist group that is somewhat affiliated with al-Qaeda. It has an estimated [20,000 fighters](#). Its fighters are Chechens, Uighurs, Moroccans, Saudis, Uzbeks, and Europeans (mostly of Arab descent). It [controls](#) part of the Idlib province and the Dera province. It has recently [been divided](#), and seen clashes, between factions.
- Free Syrian Army (FSA) [was considered](#) the most secular of the groups. Its estimated 35,000 fighters are factionalized and mostly are defectors from the Syrian military. It is unclear how much [control](#) the leadership of the FSA has over its fighters. At present, [much](#) of the FSA is now dominated by jihadists.
- The Southern Front of the FSA has about [30,000 men](#) in southern Syria. It [is moderate](#) and [has been armed](#) by Jordan and Israel. Israel has helped its fighters to create a buffer zone around the Golan, and it has [helped to contain](#) al-Qaeda and ISIS. Israel [has also assisted](#): [Liwaa' Fursan al-Jolan](#) and [Firqat Ahrar Nawa](#). Israel has also conducted drone strikes and shelling.

ISIS – ISIS is mostly defunct in Syria, although an affiliate of ISIS, Jaish Khaled Bin Walid, is [estimated](#) to have 1,200 fighters, and has territory in western Daraa province, along the border with the Golan Heights.

The Kurds/ The SDF – the U.S. is [supposedly](#) going to give “diplomatic recognition” of the *de facto* authority of the SDF. They control [about 28%](#) of Syria, and [have about 4 million people](#), a majority of which are NOT Kurdish. The SDF 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.”

- 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](#) 50,000 troops, of which the Kurdish percentage has dipped to about 55%. The rest are Sunni Arabs, Turkmen and Christian Assyrians.
- The U.S. is working with the Kurds to reposition about 30,000 SDF forces for border security force. This has antagonized Turkey.
- The U.S. has [at least 2000 to 4000](#) troops in Syria, primarily working to train and advise the SDF. In 2018, \$500 million was provided to the SDF.

The Turks & their allies

- [20 or so tanks](#) and a small amount of Turkish troops – [possibly 350](#) – originally participated in the Turkish incursion into northern Syria. This has since been expanded to about [3000 - 8000](#) troops.
- Turkey has many rebel allies that it insists are moderate fighters. These include jihadist elements of the FSA, Faylaq al-Sham, the Levant Front, and [Nour al-Din al-Zenki](#).

Humanitarian Crisis

In 2011, the population of Syria [was numbered](#) at 22 million. [An estimated](#) 6.3 million people remain internally displaced across Syria, and a further 5 million are refugees in neighboring countries. More than half of the people in the country are in need of humanitarian assistance; numbering at [13.5 million](#). 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. The UN [estimates](#) rebuilding Syria will cost \$250 billion.

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