



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. 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.

2018 Civil War Situation in Syria

In its 7th year, the 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 SDF/Kurds and their allies, Israel vs. the Shia forces; and Sunni extremist groups vs. Sunni extremist groups. There are also numerous outside players involved: Russia, Iran, Israel, 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.

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 forces in Syria. They have carved out territory in the northern region. 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. 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. A [system of justice](#) has been set up. In July of 2018, the Syrian Democratic Council in Tabqa [brought](#) together civil councils that have emerged across SDF territory in the north and east. In August of 2018, the SDC [began negotiating](#) with the Assad regime, seeking “pluralism and democracy and decentralization.”

Turkey has militarily intervened in Syria, [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 troops some elements 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.” 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 [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. 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 [conquered](#) Afrin, killing at least 10,000 Kurds, and driving out 180,000 more, and 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 of Afrin. 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.

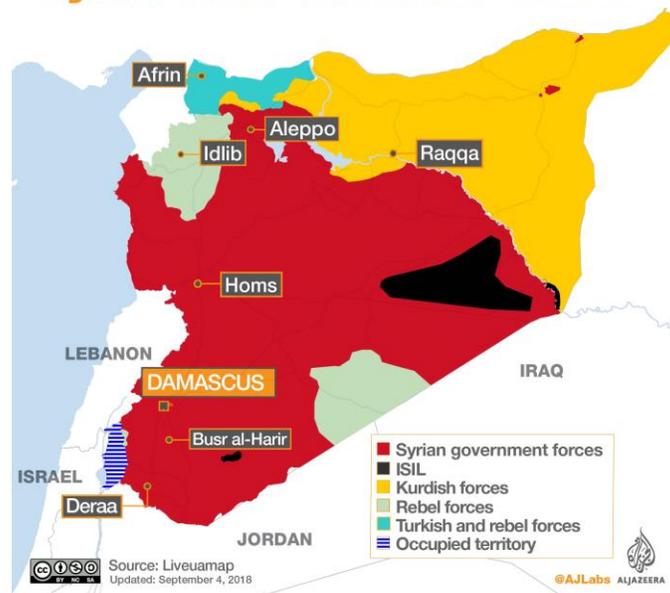
Important Points

- In the North, the Turks and their allies [have conquered](#) areas including al-Bab and Afrin. It [has vowed](#) to stay in Syria until Syrian elections are held. The Turks and their allies have focused on fighting the SDF, not ISIS, and also [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’ [strategy](#) is to reach the Syrian border with Israel to open a new front against Israel, while distracting Israel with Hamas attacks in Gaza, in the hope of deterring the Israelis from truly acting on either. If successful, Iran will have set up fronts on Israel’s borders with Gaza, Lebanon and Syria.
- 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.
- The Iranians [are establishing](#) their own military bases across this country, which Israel [has often targeted](#) for destruction. Israel also 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, [considered](#) one of the most advanced in the world, has a radius of some 200 kilometers, meaning a battery placed near Damascus would cover much of Israel.

Syria: Who controls what?



Military Strength

Pro-Assad Forces – they 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.

- 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.
 - 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: [4000-5000](#) 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. *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 – ISIS [probably has](#) 1,500-2,000 fighters remain in Syria.

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](#) 70,000 troops, of which the Kurdish percentage has dipped to about 55%. The rest are Sunni Arabs, Turkmen and Christian Assyrians.
- The SDF commander in chief is [Mazloum Kobani](#).
- The U.S. has [at least 2000 to 4000](#) troops in Syria, working to train and advise the SDF. In 2018, \$500 million was provided to the SDF. They are also being used to protect the SDF from Turkish forces. In December of 2018, President Trump [announced](#) the U.S. troops would leave [soon](#).

The Turks & their allies – 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. There are also an estimated [2.5 to 3.3 million people](#) – at least [1.2 million](#) of whom are internally displaced – currently crammed into the largely rural region of Idlib province. The groups ruling Idlib are allied with Turkey, which 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.

- [Over a thousand](#) Turkish troops and possibly [25,000 – 60,000](#) allied Syrian fighters in Turkish controlled areas. Most of the Syrian fighters have radical backgrounds [with ISIS](#) or [other groups](#).
- In Idlib, the Turks [helped form](#) the Jaish al-Watani (National Front for Liberation), which brings together a number of smaller groups, including Ahrar al-Sham, Nour al-Din al-Zenki, and some groups affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. They claim a total strength close to 100,000.
- The [dominant faction](#) in Idlib is Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (the al-Qaeda franchise in Syria) which [controls](#) more than 60 percent of Idlib.

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. [13.5 million](#) people are in need of humanitarian assistance. 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](#). It is [estimated](#) that it will cost \$300 to \$400 billion to rebuild Syria. One American citizen [has been executed](#) by the Assad forces.

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