



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:** The Kurds in Syria have similar histories to their counterparts in neighboring states. There are an [estimated](#) 2 million Kurds living in the northern region of Syria, which the Kurds call Rojava (West-Kurdistan). Most Kurds in Rojava are Sunni Muslim but identify more with being Kurdish. Under the ruling of both Hafiz and Bashar Assad, Kurds in Syria have faced [systematic repression](#) and discrimination. They were only granted citizenship by the government in 2011. 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, who refer to themselves as al-Muwahhidin, or "believers in one God," are concentrated in the rural, mountainous areas east and south of Damascus. The area is called Jabal al-Arab or Jabal al-Druze. They tend to support Assad.

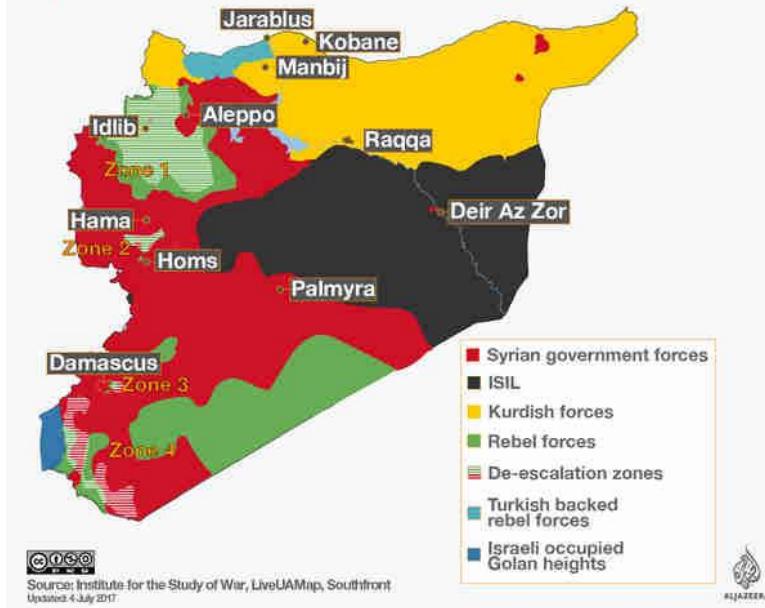
Failed Arab Spring in Syria

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 fire 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.

2016 Civil War Situation in Syria

In its fifth 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: ISIS vs. Pro-Assad forces, Turks and their allies vs. Kurds and their allies, Sunni Arab groups vs. Sunni Arab groups, etc. There are also numerous outside players involved: Russia, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the other Gulf States, and the U.S.

Syria: Who controls what?



Iran assists Assad [to keep](#) its regional influence over Syria and to cement a “Shiite crescent” from Iran to Lebanon. 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. This is mainly due to its desire to protect its regional interest against the U.S. and also 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 blindly 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 against ISIS, Assad, and the other jihadist opposition forces. They have carved out what they believe is historically their territory in the northern region. The Syrian Kurds are led by the moderate leftist Democratic Union Party, co-Chaired by Salih Muslim, which is an offshoot of, and still associated with, the PKK in Turkey. The U.S. has [provided](#) arms and supplies to the Kurds and its allies, although Turkey has objected. In Oct. of 2015, the Kurds helped [organize](#) a coalition of Kurdish and Arab fighting factions from northeastern Syria into the Syria Democratic Forces (SDF), which has emerged as the centerpiece of the U.S.-led military effort against ISIS, in Syria. The Syrian Kurds generally have [a good record](#) of respecting the rights of minorities in the region, although they have [admitted](#) some discriminatory incidents. The SDF political wing, the [Syrian Democratic Council](#), [announced](#) their plans for the “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. However, the Assad government has [announced](#) that it is open to negotiations with Kurds over autonomy.

Turkey has also recently 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. Turkey has long been [blamed](#) for turning a blind eye to and even assisting ISIS. When the Kurdish town of [Kobani](#) was attacked by ISIS in 2014, Turkish tanks stood idly by. Turkey has moved its tanks into Syria, and demanded that the Kurds/SDF move back East of the Euphrates and not attempt to connect its 3 cantons (Jazira, Kobani, and Afrin). 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. But this may change.

Recent Events

- In the North, the Turks and their allies [have conquered](#) a portion of the country including al-Bab, which splits the SDF's territory.
- In the South, Syria and Iran are making a push to reconquer the area. Iran is [close to establishing](#) a "land bridge" or "Shiite Crescent" from Iran through northern Iraq into Syria and Lebanon. This will 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.

U.S. Articulated Goals in Syria

The United States' articulated ultimate goals in Syria are: to end Assad's rule, negotiate a settlement to end the war, and defeat ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliated groups. The U.S. has backed the Kurds, Sunni Arab "moderate" rebels, and also local Sunni tribes to fight ISIS. The U.S. is currently working with both Erdogan and the Kurds/SDF, where it acts to avoid confrontation between the two and urges both sides to focus on the common enemy, ISIS. The U.S. has provided airstrikes for those fighting ISIS and Assad forces.

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 is at 50,000, of which [only](#) 6000 may be battle ready.
 - Iran helped [create](#) an Alawite militia named the National Defense Forces, of up to 100,000 men. [Two other militias](#), the Desert Hawks, headquartered in the northern port city of Latakia, and the Tiger Forces from Hama, each have between 3,000 and 6,000 armed fighters.
 - Iran is [pouring](#) thousands of fighters into Syria and building military bases. Iran has stated its intention to help Assad retake all of Syria. Iran has sent [10,000-20,000-50,000-90,000](#) Shia troops into Syria: [1700-13,000-16,000](#) Iranians, a majority of which are IRGC, and [1500](#) of which are part of the Quds force; up to 10,000 fighters from Hezbollah; about 20,000 Iraqis from the PMF militias, and Iran [has threatened](#) to bring more; 15,000-20,000 Afghans; and 5000-7000 Pakistanis. Iran [pays](#) for these troops. [1000 Iranian IRGC troops](#) have died. As of 2017, [80% of Assad fighting force](#) is Iranian sourced.
 - Russia officially insists it has no troops in Syria; unofficially, it may [have](#) more than 4000. *Sky News has estimated* 500 to 600 Russians have died in Syria, compared with the official casualty count of 19. Russia has deployed air forces [including](#) Su-24 and Su-34 frontline bombers to [Latakia](#), Syria. Russia has deployed a large naval force in Syria, with a carrier and escort ships. Russia has deployed the S-300 and S-400 missile systems to its [Hemeimeem air base](#) in Latakia and Tartus naval base. [S-300 and S-400 missiles](#) are transportable – their radars, launchers, and command systems can be loaded on tracked vehicles.
 - China [has become involved](#) in Syria, providing aid and training to pro-Assad forces. This is possibly [because](#) of the Uighur jihadist rebels fighting for al-Qaeda.

Non-ISIS Sunni Arab Rebel Groups – The U.S. estimates that there are 50,000 or more fighters it calls “moderate opposition”; there is overlap between the forces of the groups here AND the SDF AND the Turkish allies; including jihadsts, there may be between 100,000 and 150,000 rebels. Parts of the Idlib province in the North are controlled by these groups.

- Ahrar al-Sham is a Sunni Islamist group that aims to replace the Assad Regime with an Islamic government. Unlike ISIS and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, Ahrar al-Sham emphasizes that its campaign is limited to Syria and is not pursuing global Jihad. Ahrar al-Sham has about 20,000 fighters.
- Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, a coalition dominated by Fatah al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) is a Sunni Islamist group that is affiliated with al-Qaeda. It has an estimated 20,000 fighters. 30% of its forces are comprised of foreign fighters. Its fighters are Chechens, Uighurs, Moroccans, Saudis, Uzbeks, and Europeans (mostly of Arab descent). It controls part of the Idlib province and Dera province.
- Free Syrian Army (FSA) was considered the biggest and most secular of the rebel groups fighting the Assad government. Its estimated 35,000 fighters are organized in factions, and mostly are defectors from the Syrian military. It is unclear how much control the supposed leadership of the FSA has over its fighters. At present, much of the FSA is now dominated by jihadsts.

ISIS – It is unclear the size of official ISIS forces in Iraq & Syria, although few remain and little land is controlled by them. An affiliate of ISIS, Jaish Khaled Bin Walid, is estimated to have some 1,200 fighters, and controls territory in western Daraa province, along the border with the occupied Golan Heights.

The Kurds/ The SDF – they control about 25% of Syria, and have about 4 million people, a majority of which are NOT Kurdish. Raqqa was liberated by the SDF in October of 2017. 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 Kurdish armed forces are called the YPG (People's Protection Unit) and the YPJ (Women). There are roughly 70,000 Kurdish fighters. These numbers include non-Syrian Kurds.
- Some of these are also 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 SDF has 32 factions; it originally started with 13.
- The U.S. has at least 1700 troops in Syria, primarily working to train and advise the SDF. However, there may be as many as 2000 to 4000. In 2018, \$500 million was provided to the SDF. In November of 2017, at the behest of Turkish President, the U.S. (maybe) stopped supplying the Kurds with weapons.

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.
- There are 1500 – 5000 Syrian Turkish allies in the north who are taking part in the Turkish incursion into Syria. Most were formerly FSA, although they also include fragments of all the Sunni rebel groups and terrorist organizations. Turkey insists that they are “moderate” fighters.

Humanitarian Crisis

In 2011, the population of Syria was numbered at 22 million. Today, 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. 400,000 to almost 500,000 people have been killed. Assad is further cracking down on opponents in the areas he controls, and he and the Iranians have been brutal to their opponents, and have been steadily repopulating their areas with Shia Muslims from Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran. It is doubtful that all of the Sunni Syrian refugees will every return to Syria. The UN estimates rebuilding Syria will cost \$250 billion.

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