

# PS 114S. International Security in a Changing World

## The Syrian Civil War: A Cheat Sheet<sup>1</sup>

### 1 Causes of the Syrian Civil War

- Discontent with Authoritarianism and Assad family's long reign of power in Syria since the 1970s
- Syria is 74% Sunni, but the Assad family is part of a Shia sect known as the Alawites
- High unemployment, limited opportunities for upward mobility, few political freedoms within country
- Arab Spring and success of protest in Egypt, Tunisia, and other neighboring states
- Initial government crackdown against protestors backfired

### 2 Actors in the Syrian Civil War

#### 2.1 Assad Government

- Capital city: Damascus
- International Allies:
  - Russia (air strikes and assistance)
  - China
  - Hezbollah (troops and assistance)
  - Iran
- Unconditionally refuses to leave office undermining most attempts for serious peace talks

#### 2.2 Syrian rebels

- Capital city: Aleppo
- Numerous factions including Free Syrian Army, Southern Front Forces, Army of Islam, and Kurdish Forces. Al-Nusrah Front is an al-Qaeda aligned extremist group fighting in Syria. The US has labeled them a foreign terrorist organization, but has been critical in rebel offenses in Northwest Syria.
- Unconditionally demands Assad leaves office as part of any peace agreement
- Allies/support from:
  - US-led coalition including UK and France (as of December 2015) (covert assistance)
  - Turkey (assistance)
  - Arab League (troops<sup>2</sup> and assistance)

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<sup>1</sup>Please do not circulate without author's permission.

<sup>2</sup>Announced in February 2016, but not yet deployed

## 2.3 ISIS

- Capital City: Raqqa
- Target of large air strikes by US-led coalition in eastern Syria/northern Iraq
- Likely to secure a separate peace with Assad government if Assad wins

## 3 Timeline of Key Events

### 3.1 2011: Conflict Begins

Peaceful protests against the regime commenced in March 2011 as Syrians witnessed and were inspired by successful mobilizations against the governments in Tunisia, Egypt, and other Arab states. The Assad regime's harsh government crackdown galvanized further protests and unrest in Homs, Banyas, and Damascus. Superficial concessions by the Assad government failed to quell demands for meaningful reform. As violence continued, the government began a massive military crackdown against protestors earning condemnation from international observers. In July 2011, the largest wing of the Syrian opposition movement formally organized as the Free Syrian Army headed by Riad Al-Assad, a former Syrian army colonel. Defections by other prominent Syrian military commanders and political officials soon followed.

### 3.2 2012: Peace Talks Fail

Despite attempts by the Arab League and the United Nations to implement ceasefires during the winter months of 2011-2012, no plan prevailed, in part, to mistrust between Syrian rebels and the Assad government about compliance. In June 2012, Kofi Annan spearheaded a meeting of key international players in Geneva to facilitate a course of action to resolve the crisis. This meeting resulted in the "Geneva Communiqué," presented a road map for resolving the crisis including a ceasefire agreement, full humanitarian access, and steps for a gradual political transition to replace the Assad government. The Syrian government rejected a key tenet of the proposal that Assad must step down.

### 3.3 2013: Assad crosses the "red line"

In late 2013, reports surfaced that the Assad government had reportedly used chemical weapons on August 21, 2013 in a Damascus suburb killing up to 1,400 civilians. Despite crossing the United States' "red line" for intervention, international parties remain out of the conflict after Russia adeptly maneuvered to have Syria dismantle its existing chemical weapons facilities.

### 3.4 2014: The Rise of ISIS

Throughout 2013 and 2014, neither the Syrian opposition nor the Assad government make substantial territorial gains. At the same time, however, an extremist branch of Al-Qaeda, ISIL or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, had entered eastern Syria and taken over vast, stateless territories transforming the city of Raqqa in ISIL's de facto capital.

### 3.5 2015: Russia Intervention

Following Russian intervention in the Syrian War on September 30, 2015, began to turn in favor of the Assad regime for the first time in years. With the help of Russian air strikes, the Assad regime was able to make substantial gains against opposition forces in northern Syria. A current offensive to regain control of Aleppo began in October 2015.

### 3.6 2016: Assad Gains Ground and New Peace Talks Fail

As of February 2016, Assad forces were closing in around Aleppo threatening the rebel's seat of power. As a result, UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura canceled the third round of peace talks set to begin in Geneva on February 2, 2016. Many outsiders feared that Assad's increased strength in the wake of Russian intervention would make the government even less likely to accede to future peace talks.

## 4 U.S. Position on the Syrian Civil War

Since the Syrian uprising against Bashar al-Assad began, the United States sought to minimize its role in the conflict. Achieving that goal has become increasingly difficult, especially after the Assad regime perpetrated a chemical weapons attack in August 2013, Iraqi governance faltered after the U.S. withdrawal, and ISIL has become a formidable threat to US security interests in the region. The collapse of the Geneva talks, the horrendous humanitarian crisis, and recent terrorist activity inspired by ISIS have increased the internal and external pressure on the United States to take a bolder course of action.

- **2011:** The United States called for Assad's resignation in August 2011, they provided little explicit support. Obama conceded there was "no military solution to the conflict" and refused to consider limited intervention even after the success of NATO's operation in Libya to oust Muammar Qaddafi.
- **2012:** The US closes their embassy in Damascus and issues a series of sanctions against the Assad regime. These sanctions are later modified in order for the U.S. to begin providing nonlethal assistance to rebel-controlled areas.
- **2013:** Despite warning of "consequences" if the Syrian regime used chemical weapons, the United States took no action against the Assad regime in September 2013 due to the deft maneuvering of Russian President Vladimir Putin. While this provided a diplomatic solution to the crisis, it raised serious questions about the United State's resolve and commitment to humanitarian issues much to the chagrin of UN Ambassador Samantha Powers.
- **2014:** The US starts a covert plan to arm moderate rebels in Syria through a "train and equip" program, but this is suspended in October 2015 when reports surfaced that this program had trained, at most, four to five rebels. ISIS overruns much of eastern Syria
- **2014-2015:** The US begins Operation "Inherent Resolve" to conduct targeted air strikes against ISIS forces in Syria and Iraq in an attempt to "degrade and destroy" the terrorist group.
- **2016:** The CIA continues to covertly arm certain rebel groups in the region. Critics speculate that Russia's intervention in the conflict makes it near impossible for the US to militarily intervene at this point.

Inaction after the chemical weapons attack led the U.S. to lose serious face in the region over the issue. The United States is challenged with limited leverage to unilaterally change the distribution of power on the ground. Iran continues to provide Assad manpower and logistical support. The Arab League is channeling weapons and money to Islamist extremist opposition groups. And Russia, with its veto authority on the UN

Security Council and increasing presence in Syria, has actively obstructed U.S.-led efforts at nearly every turn. Finally, the U.S. is frequently being forced to escalate its fights against ISIS as the organization grows ever stronger making it cognizant of the need to secure the support of an international coalition to effectively degrade and destroy? ISIS.

## 5 Challenges in Resolving the Syrian Civil War

- **ISIS:** The group has been expanding its territory since it first captured parts of Northern and Eastern Syria in 2013-2014. In 2015, ISIS militants clinged to key territories across Iraq and expanded their hold in Syria. ISIS has been continuously growing, feeding into the narrative of momentum and inevitability that then feeds recruitment to ISIS. ISIS is overthrowing modern state boundaries, resulting in massive ethno-sectarian killing and cleansing. Already threatening to escalate violence between Middle Eastern states fighting proxy wars in Syria for several years, ISIS may have military operations that cascade into a broader regional conflict. ISIS is a direct threat to neighboring states in the Middle East and is broadcasting its intent to attack Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the West.
- **Humanitarian Crisis:**
  - **Human Rights Violations:** A UN report found evidence that all parties to the conflict have committed war crimes - including murder, torture, rape and enforced disappearances. Rebels and governments forces have also both been accused of denying access to food, water, and health services along with sexual violence throughout the war.
  - **Refugee Crisis:** Since fighting began, more than 7.5 millions Syrians have been internally displaced or approximately 1/3 of the country's population. An additional 4.1 million Syrians have fled to neighboring countries, including Jordan and Turkey, to flee the violence since 2011.
- **Assad's Resolve:** Since Russia intervened in the Syrian Civil War, government forces have fought back from their lowest point in May 2015 and begun a series of successful offensive operations around the rebel stronghold of Aleppo. The current offensive, which began in October 2015, has been highly successful for the government due in large part to Russian air strikes. 2016 peace talks failed when the Assad government announced they would wait. Many fear Russian intervention has bolstered the Syrian's governments capabilities and willingness to fight on for years rather than submit to peace talks.
- **Proxy War:** The US has been covertly arming rebel groups in the countries for a few years as part of its "train and equip" program. In September 2015, Russia began air attacks to support the Syrian government. Russia's entry into the Syrian conflict on Assad's side as well as Iran's has complicated the U.S.-led coalitions year-long bombing campaign against ISIS militant groups in Syria. The United States fears Russian intervention in Syria will stoke the conflict, further radicalize opposition groups and make formation of a coalition government less likely.
- **Transnational Terrorism:** Since declaring its caliphate in June 2014, ISIS has conducted or inspired over 50 terrorist attacks in 18 countries, killing 1,100 people and injuring over 1,700. It is further thought to have attracted an unprecedented number of foreign fighters to travel to Syria stoking fears that these individuals could return to commit terrorist attacks at home. ISIS has called on sympathizers in the West—homegrown, self-radicalized extremists inspired by IS propaganda—to commit violent acts at home. In November of 2015, ISIS claimed responsibility for attacking Paris, leaving 127 dead and 300 injured.