

**Introduction:** Use the below summary of the causes, key events and consequences of the Syrian Civil War to inform your Options and scripted discussion on the future role of the United States in this conflict. This summary is far from comprehensive, so if you need additional resources, you are encouraged to look for other reliable sources.

### **Causes**

The Syrian Civil War is a direct consequence of the Arab Spring of 2011. In the spring of 2011, beginning in Tunisia, citizens of a number of nations across the region used the power of nonviolent protest to overthrow authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. In Syria democratic reformers attempted to put pressure on the Syrian government to make their system more democratic and transparent. The Syrian government, led by President Bashar al-Assad, responded to the protests by killing hundreds of demonstrators and imprisoning many more. In July 2011, defectors from the military announced the formation of the Free Syrian Army, a rebel group aiming to overthrow the government, and Syria began to slide into civil war.

### **Combatants**

While the protests in 2011 were mostly non-sectarian, the armed conflict surfaced starker sectarian divisions. Most Syrians are Sunni Muslims, but Syria's security establishment has long been dominated by members of the Alawi sect (Shia), of which Assad is a member.

Since the conflict began, as a Syrian rebellion against the Assad government, many new rebel groups have joined the fighting in Syria and have frequently fought one another.

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) is a loose conglomeration of armed brigades formed in 2011 by defectors from the Syrian army and civilians backed by the United States, Turkey, and several Gulf countries.

ISIL emerged in northern and eastern Syria in 2013 after overrunning large portions of Iraq. The group quickly gained international notoriety for its brutal executions and its energetic use of social media to recruit fighters from around the world.

Other groups fighting in Syria include Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, Iran-backed Hezbollah, and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) dominated by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG).

Foreign backing and open intervention have played a large role in Syria's civil war. Russia entered the conflict in 2015 and has been the Assad government's main ally since then. The governments of majority-Shia Iran and Iraq, and Lebanon-based Hezbollah, have supported Assad, while Sunni-majority countries, including Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia supported anti-Assad rebels.

Since 2016, Turkish troops have launched several operations against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS) near its borders, as well as against Kurdish groups armed by the United States.

The US has armed anti-Assad rebel groups and led an international coalition bombing ISIL targets since 2014. Israel carried out air raids inside Syria, reportedly targeting Hezbollah and pro-government fighters and facilities. The US has repeatedly stated its opposition to the Assad government backed by Russia but has not involved itself as deeply.

In September 2015, Russia launched a bombing campaign against what it referred to as "terrorist groups" in Syria, which included ISIL as well as anti-Assad rebel groups backed by the USA. Russia has also deployed military advisers to shore up Assad's defences. At the UN Security Council, Russia and China have repeatedly vetoed Western-backed resolutions on Syria.

### **Consequences**

A United Nations agency says Syria's seven-year-long civil war has cost the country \$388 billion in economic damage. The U.N. Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) says it estimates the cost of the material destruction — damage to roads, infrastructure, homes and other physical objects — is \$120 billion. It says the cost of lost productivity — or losses to the country's gross domestic product (GDP) — is \$268 billion.

Monitoring groups say at least 400,000 people have been killed in Syria's civil war. More than 11 million others — or half of Syria's pre-war population — have been displaced from their homes, according to the U.N., including more than 5 million who have been made refugees abroad.

### **Situation Today**

The mainly Sunni Arab rebellion against the Bashar al-Assad regime is over. What remains of it is now the military component of a Turkish project to turn a corner of northwest Syria into a Turkish client entity.

In place of the old wars, however, three new ones have started. They are taking place in the three de facto independent areas whose boundaries are becoming apparent as the smoke from the previous battle clears: the regime-controlled area, guaranteed by Russia; the area east of the Euphrates River controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces, which are primarily composed of Kurdish fighters protected by the United States and Western air power; and finally the area controlled by the Turks and their Sunni Islamist allies in Idlib province. The regime area consists of about 60 percent of the territory of the country, the SDF has around 30 percent, and the Turkish-Sunni Islamist area is around 10 percent. Each of these areas is now hosting a civil war of its own, supported by neighboring enclaves.

Sources:

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