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Syria Conflict Overview: 2011-2018

2011: Protests Emerge

In March 2011, the arrest of a group of school children triggered protests in the southern Syrian province of Dar'a. Mostly peaceful demonstrations called for political and economic reform, although violence was reported at times. As security forces responded with mass arrests and at times opened fire, protests spread to other provinces. The opposition movement eventually coalesced into two umbrella groups—one political, one armed—with the leadership of both based primarily in exile. Political groups established the Syrian National Council (SNC), which remained fractured in the absence of a shared vision for Syria's future. Military defectors formed the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which claimed leadership over the armed opposition but whose authority was generally unrecognized by local armed groups, including armed Islamists. Ongoing violence, primarily but not exclusively on the part of the Syrian government, prompted President Obama in August 2011 to call for Syrian President Asad to step aside. Meanwhile, the Al Qaeda (AQ) affiliate in neighboring Iraq (the Islamic State of Iraq, ISI) sent members to Syria under the banner of a new group known as the Nusra Front. In December 2011, the first Nusra Front suicide attacks hit government buildings in Damascus.

2012: Insurgency

The conflict became increasingly violent, as the government began to use artillery and fixed wing aircraft against opposition targets. Extremist attacks became more frequent—between November 2011 and December 2012, the Nusra Front claimed responsibility for nearly 600 attacks in Syria. In February 2012, the United States closed its embassy in Damascus, citing security concerns. Local armed groups began to seize pockets of territory around the country, primarily in rural areas. A July bombing in central Damascus killed several senior regime officials, including the Minister of Defense. Concerns about potential government use of chemical weapons (CW) led President Obama in August to declare the use of chemical weapons to be a "red line" for the United States.

The international community increased efforts to reach a negotiated solution to the conflict. In June, the United States and Russia signed the Geneva Communiqué, which called for the establishment of a transitional governing body in Syria with full executive powers. The document, which became the basis of future negotiations between the government and the opposition, did not clarify the role of Asad in any future government. Meanwhile, Syria's political opposition settled into its present form, known as the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces—generally shortened to the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC), or *Etilaf* in Arabic.

Figure 1. Syria

Source: CRS, using ESRI, and U.S. State Department data.

2013: Proxy War, ISIS, Chemical Attacks

In March 2013, rebels seized the city of Raqqah, which became the first provincial capital to fall out of government control. A series of other opposition victories in the area led the government effectively to concede control of Syria's rural northeast. These rebel victories prompted increased involvement by external allies of the Syrian government—including Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran, and Russia—to bolster the Asad regime. Meanwhile, the United States, Turkey, and some European and Arab Gulf states increased their support to the Syrian opposition. While nominally united under the Friends of Syria framework, regional and Western states differed in their goals and strategies, and thus in their support for various factions. Separately, ISI leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi announced the merger of his group and the Nusra Front into the Islamic State of Iraq and Al Sham (ISIS/ISIL), a move opposed by Al Qaeda's central leadership in Afghanistan. The merger triggered extensive infighting among Syrian jihadist groups.

Concerns about Syrian government use of CW grew in 2013. In April, the United Kingdom and France claimed that the Syrian government had used chemical weapons on multiple occasions since December 2012. In August, a sarin gas attack attributed to the Syrian government killed an estimated 1400 people in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta. President Obama requested congressional approval of a limited authorization for the use of military force to respond. Congress debated, but did not authorize the request. Russia subsequently negotiated an agreement for the Syrian government to become a party to the Chemical Weapons Convention, dispose of its declared chemical weapons stockpiles (completed in 2016) and destroy production facilities (completed in 2018).

2014: Operation Inherent Resolve Begins

In February, Al Qaeda severed ties with ISIS, which went on to seize vast stretches of territory in central and northeast Syria and northern Iraq. In June, ISIS declared a caliphate with its capital at Raqqah. The group changed its name to the Islamic State (IS), and thousands of additional foreign fighters traveled to Syria and Iraq to join its ranks. In August, the United States began air strikes in Iraq to stop the IS territorial advance there, and to reduce the threat to U.S. personnel in Iraq. In September, the United States expanded air strikes to Syria at Iraq's request, to prevent the Islamic State from using Syria as a base for operations in Iraq. A subsequent air campaign to lift the IS siege on the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane brought the United States into partnership with the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). In September, Congress authorized a train and equip program for select Syrian forces. The program was designed to build new local force units capable of fighting the Islamic State, protecting opposition-held areas, and "promoting the conditions for a negotiated settlement to end the conflict in Syria." In October, the Defense Department established Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) to formalize military operations against IS forces in Iraq and Syria.

2015: Syria Train & Equip Begins

In 2015, the Syrian government faced additional territorial losses. Opposition forces captured the provincial capital of Idlib in northwestern Syria and surrounding areas with the support of Al Qaeda-linked fighters. IS fighters seized territory in Homs province, and Kurdish fighters expanded their control along the Turkish border. In May, the United States began training recruits for the Syria Train and Equip Program. In mid-2015, Russia began a military buildup in Syria, and started air strikes in September—targeting opposition groups in addition to IS fighters. In October, the first U.S. Special Operations Forces deployed to Syria to support local partner forces. Challenges in implementation led the Obama Administration to modify the Syria Train and Equip program to focus on equipping existing units commanded by vetted leaders. Kurdish YPG forces aligned with a small number of non-Kurdish groups to form an umbrella group known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which began to receive U.S. support.

2016: Ceasefires Fail; Battle for Aleppo

The United States attempted to work with Russia to reduce the violence in Syria, which both the Syrian government and opposition described as a prerequisite to their continued participation in U.N.-led peace talks. The two countries twice attempted to use their leverage with the Syrian opposition and government, respectively, to implement a cessation of hostilities. Both initiatives were unsuccessful. In contrast, the counter-IS campaign successfully severed much of the group's access to the Turkish border—a key supply and foreign fighter transit route. However, Turkey strongly opposed the participation of YPG fighters in the campaign, and launched an operation inside Syria aimed at neutralizing IS forces and preventing Kurdish YPG forces from consolidating control along the Syria-Turkey border. Meanwhile, regime and opposition forces battled for control of Aleppo—Syria's largest city. In December, regime-backed forces took full control of Aleppo, in a battle the U.N. described as involving war crimes on all sides.

2017: Counter-IS Operations Advance

In January 2017, Russia—backed by Turkey and Iran—initiated a series of peace talks in the Kazakh capital of Astana between Syrian government and opposition forces. The talks became known as the Astana process, and were seen by some as an effort to circumvent the U.S.-backed Geneva process. The Astana process established three opposition-held areas as "de-escalation" zones in an effort to reduce violence. Separately, the United States, Russia, and Jordan established a southwest ceasefire area in Dar'a.

In April, a suspected nerve agent attack by government forces on the rebel-held town of Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib province killed an estimated 80-100 people. The United States struck Al Shayrat airfield in Homs province, from which U.S. intelligence sources had concluded the attack was launched. In a series of incidents in May and June, U.S. forces also carried out defensive strikes against Syrian government and allied forces deemed to be threatening U.S. forces and local partners in Syria. In June, SDF forces began operations to retake the IS capital at Raqqah, and SDF forces recaptured the city in October. In December, U.S. military officials announced that roughly 2,000 U.S. personnel were operating in Syria, and that 98 percent of territory formerly held by IS forces had been liberated.

2018: Syrian Government Recovers

External actors escalated military operations in Syria. Tensions flared between Iran and Israel, as the latter increasingly targeted Iranian facilities and personnel inside Syria. Turkey launched a military operation inside Syria targeting Kurdish forces and causing a manpower drain from counter-IS operations in eastern Syria. The United States struggled to reduce tensions in the city of Manbij, as Turkey threatened to expand its military campaign unless Kurdish forces withdrew east of the Euphrates River.

By early 2018, the U.S. intelligence community assessed that the Syria conflict had "decisively shifted in the Syrian regime's favor." By mid-2018, the Syrian government had recaptured most areas designated as de-escalation zones in 2017 through a combination of military force and coercive surrender agreements. By late 2018, only parts of the Idlib de-escalation area remained outside government control, held by a constellation of opposition and AQ-linked groups.

In 2018, State Department officials described U.S. Syria policy as seeking (1) the enduring defeat of the Islamic State; (2) a political settlement to the Syrian civil war per U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254; and (3) the withdrawal of Iranian-commanded forces from Syria. Officials stated that the United States planned to remain in Syria to stabilize areas liberated from IS control, and to train local partners to hold these areas so that IS forces could not re-emerge. In December, President Trump stated that the Islamic State had been defeated in Syria, and that U.S. troops would be withdrawing "now." Subsequent statements by senior Administration officials suggested that the withdrawal could take several months, and was conditional on reaching an agreement with Turkey that guaranteed the protection of U.S.-backed Kurdish forces in Syria. The year ended amid uncertainty regarding the withdrawal and its impact on U.S. programs in Syria.

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