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Syria Conflict Overview: 2011-2021

The conflict in Syria is entering its tenth year and has displaced roughly half of the country's pre-war population. As of 2021, five countries regularly operate in or maintain military forces in Syria: Russia, Turkey, Iran, Israel, and the United States—as well as transnational terrorist groups such as the Islamic State, Al Qaeda (AQ), and Lebanese Hezbollah. This piece provides a historical overview of the conflict. For additional details and recent developments see CRS Report RL33487, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, coordinated by Carla E. Humud.

2011: Protests Emerge

In March, antigovernment protests broke out in Syria, which has been ruled by the Asad family for more than five decades. Two umbrella opposition groups emerged—one political, one armed—with the leadership of both based primarily in exile. Political groups established the Syrian National Council (SNC), while 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. Escalating violence prompted President Obama in August to call for President Bashar Asad to leave power. Meanwhile, the AQ affiliate in Iraq (the Islamic State of Iraq, ISI) sent members to Syria to operate as a new group called the **Nusra Front**.

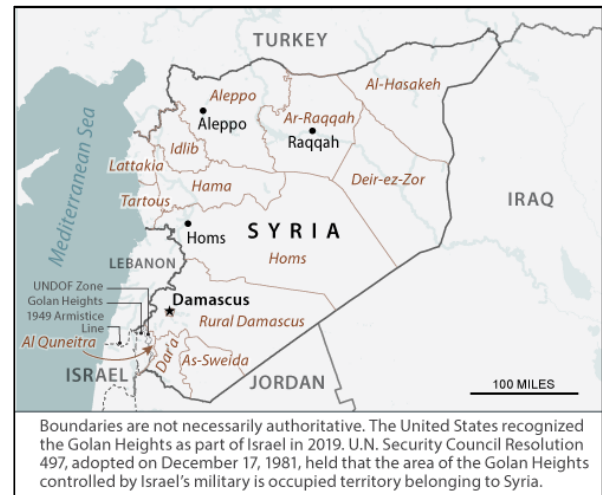
2012: Insurgency

The conflict became increasingly violent, as Syria began to use artillery and fixed wing aircraft against opposition targets. Extremist attacks became more frequent, and in February the United States closed its embassy in Damascus, citing security concerns. Armed groups began to seize territory throughout Syria, primarily in rural areas, while a bombing in Damascus killed several senior regime officials. 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, and which remains the basis of U.N.-sponsored talks between the government and the opposition. Syria's political opposition settled into its present form as the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces—aka the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC), or *Etilaf* in Arabic. The United States began **non-lethal aid** to bolster some opposition groups. In August, President Obama declared that the use of chemical weapons would be a “**red line**” for the United States.

2013: Proxy War, ISIS, Chemical Attacks

In March, opposition forces seized the city of Raqqah. Subsequent opposition victories in the area led the government effectively to concede control of Syria's rural northeast. Opposition victories prompted increased involvement by external allies of the Syrian government—

Figure 1. Syria



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

Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran, and Russia—to bolster the Asad regime; the United States, Turkey, and some European and Arab Gulf states increased their support to the Syrian opposition. U.S. allies differed in their goals and strategies, and thus in their support for various opposition factions. ISI leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi announced the merger of ISI and the Nusra Front into the Islamic State of Iraq and Al Sham (ISIS/ISIL). In August, a Syrian government attack in Ghouta using the **nerve agent sarin** killed an estimated 1,400 people. 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. President Obama withdrew the request after Syria agreed to a joint U.S.-Russian proposal to join the Chemical Weapons Convention, dispose of its declared chemical weapons stockpiles (completed in 2016) and destroy declared production facilities (completed in 2018).

2014: Operation Inherent Resolve Begins

In February, Al Qaeda severed ties with ISIS. ISIS seized vast stretches of territory in Syria and Iraq, and in June 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 July, the U.N. Security Council adopted Resolution 2165, authorizing **cross-border aid** into opposition-held areas of Syria. In September, the United States began air strikes against IS targets in Syria, pursuant to the 2001 and 2002 Authorizations for Use of Military Force (AUMF); officials stated the Islamic State was a direct derivative of Al Qaeda. A subsequent air campaign to lift the IS siege on the town of Kobane brought the United States into partnership with the **Kurdish People's**

Protection Units (YPG). Also 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 operations against IS forces in Iraq and Syria.

2015: Syria Train and Equip Begins

Opposition forces backed by Al Qaeda-linked militants captured most of northwest Syria, IS fighters seized territory in central Syria, 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. Russia began a military buildup in Syria, and started air strikes in September—targeting opposition groups and IS fighters. In October, U.S. Special Operations Forces deployed to Syria to support local partners as the U.S. train and equip program shifted to support existing vetted forces. Kurdish YPG forces aligned with a small number of non-Kurdish groups to form the **Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)**, which began to receive U.S. support and would become the main local U.S. partner in the counter-IS campaign. Turkey opposed U.S. partnership with the SDF because Turkey considers the YPG to be the Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which both countries classify as a terrorist group.

2016: Aleppo Battle; Turkey Strikes YPG

In 2016, the U.S.-led counter-IS campaign successfully severed most Islamic State access to the Turkish border—a key supply and foreign fighter transit route. However, YPG forces advanced along the border, raising Turkish fears that the YPG could permanently consolidate a contiguous area of control along the border. To prevent this, Turkey launched **Operation Euphrates Shield** in northwest Syria along with allied Syrian opposition forces, targeting the YPG. Also, regime and opposition forces battled for control of Aleppo—Syria’s largest city. In December, regime-backed forces recaptured Aleppo in a battle the U.N. described as involving war crimes on all sides.

2017: SDF Captures Most IS Territory

Russia, Iran, and Turkey sponsored peace talks—known as the **Astana Process**—between Syrian government and opposition forces; U.S. officials described the talks as an effort to circumvent ongoing U.N.-sponsored talks at Geneva. In April, a sarin gas attack by Syrian forces on the town of Khan Sheikhoun killed an estimated 80-100 people. In response, the United States launched cruise missile strikes on a Syrian military airfield. President Trump did not seek congressional authorization prior to ordering the strikes, but stated in a letter to Congress that he had acted “pursuant to my constitutional authority to conduct foreign relations and as Commander in Chief and Chief Executive.” In October, SDF forces captured the IS capital at Raqqa. U.S. officials announced that 2,000 U.S. personnel were operating in Syria, and that U.S.-backed SDF forces had recaptured most IS territory.

2018: Foreign States Escalate Operations

In January, Turkey and its Syrian opposition allies launched a second military operation in northwest Syria (**Operation**

Olive Branch), targeting Kurdish forces and causing a manpower drain from SDF counter-IS operations in eastern Syria. The U.S. intelligence community assessed that the Syria conflict had “decisively shifted in the Syrian regime’s favor.” In April, a chlorine gas attack by Syrian military forces in Douma prompted **British, French, and U.S. missile strikes** on three chemical weapon storage and research sites. By late 2018, the Syrian government had recaptured most areas formerly held by opposition forces.

2019: IS Defeat; Turkish “Safe Zone”

In March, SDF forces captured the final IS territorial stronghold in Syria, and took custody of 12,000 IS fighters—held in makeshift prisons—and over 60,000 IS family members—held in camps for internally displaced persons. Although a U.S. raid in October killed IS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, U.S. military officials warned that the group was defeated but not eliminated, and described IS detainees as “one of the most significant risks to the success of the [defeat-ISIS] mission.” Separately, the Trump Administration sought to end some aid for opposition-held areas; Congress nevertheless appropriated funds for Syria programs and directed specific amounts for stabilization and other priorities. In October, Turkish-led forces began **Operation Peace Spring**, expelling U.S.-backed Kurdish forces from areas of north-central Syria, which it termed a “safe zone.” As of 2021, Turkish-led forces remain in this and the other border areas they previously seized. President Trump withdrew U.S. forces from the area and repositioned some to the Eastern Syria Security Area (ESSA); with roughly 600 troops remaining in Syria by late 2019.

2020: Idlib Fighting; Russian Escalation

The Syrian government escalated operations in Idlib, the last area still under the control of armed groups actively seeking Asad’s removal. Fighting in Idlib between Syrian opposition groups (backed by Turkey) and Syrian government forces (backed by Russia and Iran) resulted in the deaths of dozens of Turkish soldiers, possibly with Russian involvement. In March, Russia and Turkey signed a ceasefire agreement regarding Idlib. Outside the framework of Operation Inherent Resolve, the United States continued air strikes in Idlib against **Al Qaeda**-linked forces operating in Syria. U.S. mechanized units deployed to northeast Syria to preserve U.S. freedom of movement following “an increase in Russian aggression.”

2021: IS Continues Low-Level Insurgency

The Islamic State maintains a low-level insurgency in Syria and Iraq. U.S. military forces remain deployed in Syria, primarily in the ESSA but also at the At Tanf Garrison in the southeast. U.S. forces support local partners in their efforts to counter IS remnants—including training a new local force to deny the Islamic State revenue from oil fields. U.S. officials assess that without a U.S. presence, the SDF would “likely seek protection from the Syrian regime to protect it from a possible Turkish-backed offensive.” Press reports note that dire economic conditions have renewed limited anti-Asad protests.

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