

The Syrian Civil War

Explained

The Syrian Civil War Infographic

Syria's Wars Within a War

Some of the intersecting conflicts on a complicated battlefield.



Civil War



Sectarian War



Proxy War



More than 450,000 Syrians have lost their lives in six years of armed conflict, which began with anti-government protests before escalating into a full-scale civil war. More than 11 million others have been forced from their homes as forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad and those opposed to his rule battle each other - as well as jihadist militants from the so-called Islamic State. This is the story of the civil war so far.

How did the war start?

The government was dominated by a minority group. Over decades, Syria's religious and ethnic divides had taken on greater political importance, making the ruling minority fearful and reactive. Bashar al-Assad, the president of Syria, had strong support among the military and security services, but not the broader population, making violence more tempting.

The instability was deepened by the fact that rural Syrians had moved to cities in large numbers in recent years, driven in part by droughts linked to climate change.



The Arab Spring

- In December 2010, a Tunisian man set himself on fire in front of a government building, protesting injustice done to him by the government
- Within days, protests popped up all over the country and the Tunisian president fled
- The momentum set off uprisings throughout the Middle East in 2011 known as the Arab Spring
- These uprisings called for democratic institutions, and largely took place in Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Iraq and SYRIA



The Arab Spring in Syria

- During Arab Spring demonstrations, Assad's men opened fire on the peaceful protesters
- Triggered nationwide demand for Assad to resign
- Assad responded with only more violence
- Opposition supporters eventually began to take up arms, first to defend themselves and later to expel security forces from their local areas.

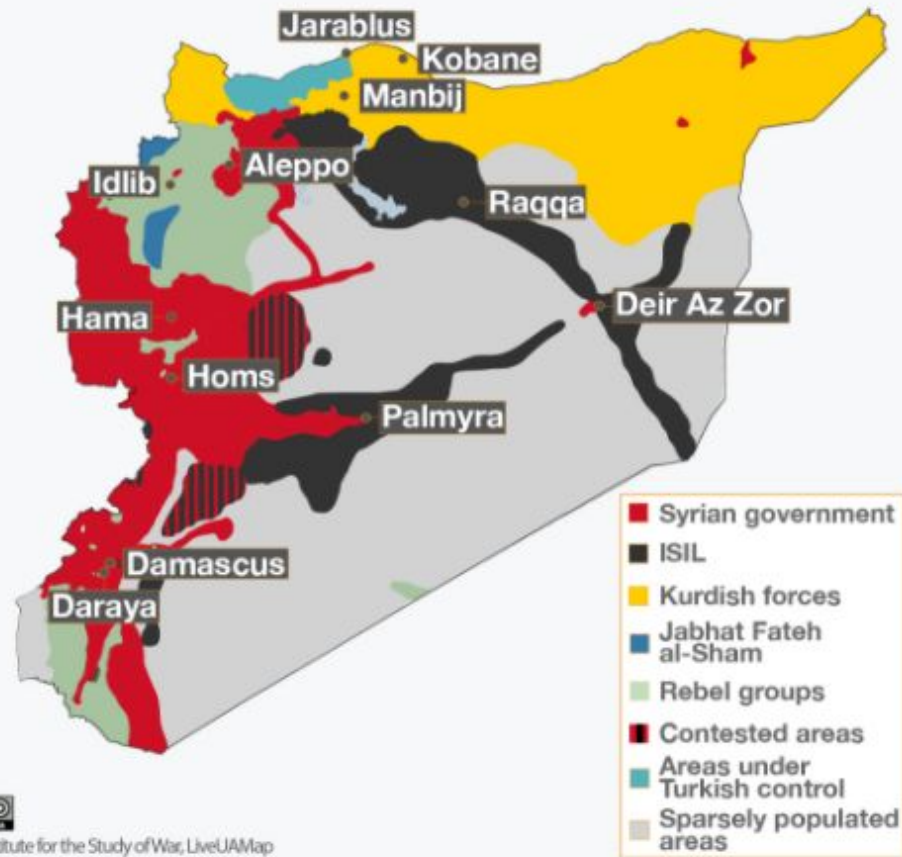


Descent into Civil War

- Violence escalated and the country descended into civil war as rebel brigades were formed to battle government forces for control of cities, towns and the countryside. Fighting reached the capital Damascus and second city of Aleppo in 2012.
- By June 2013, the UN said 90,000 people had been killed in the conflict. In September 2016, more than 400,000 have been killed in the war.
- The conflict is now more than just a battle between those for or against Assad. It has acquired sectarian overtones, pitching the country's Sunni majority against the president's Shia Alawite sect, and drawn in regional and world powers.

The war makes sense if you think of it as
four overlapping conflicts.

Syria: Who controls what?



Source: Institute for the Study of War, LiveUAMap
Updated: March 2017



The core conflict is between forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad and the rebels who oppose him. Over time, both sides fractured into multiple militias, including local and foreign fighters, but **their fundamental disagreement is over whether Mr. Assad's government should stay in power.**



This opened a second conflict:

- Syria's Kurdish (4th largest ethnic group) minority took up arms amid the chaos.
- The Kurds carved out a de facto mini-state and have gradually taken territory they see as Kurdish — sometimes with backing from the United States, which sees the Kurds as an ally against jihadist groups.
- While Assad has not focused on fighting the Kurdish groups, they are opposed by neighboring Turkey, which is in conflict with its own Kurdish minority.



The third conflict involves the Islamic State, which emerged out of infighting among jihadist groups.

In 2014, the Islamic State seized large parts of Syria and Iraq, and it declared that territory its caliphate.

The group has no allies and is at war with all other actors in the conflict.



The fourth, and most complex, dynamic may be the crisscrossing foreign interventions, which have grown steadily.

Mr. Assad receives vital support from [Iran](#) and [Russia](#), as well as the Lebanese militant group [Hezbollah](#).

The **rebels** are backed by the **United States** and oil-rich Arab states like **Saudi Arabia**. These foreign powers have different agendas, but all pursue these agendas by ramping up Syria's violence, helping to perpetuate the war.



Did you get all that?



A Bloody War

Because Assad's government is so weak, Assad seems to believe he can regain control only by violently coercing Syrians into submission. That has included using **chemical weapons**, **barrel bombs** and **starvation**.

Because neither Mr. Assad nor the rebels are strong enough to win, the battle lines push back and forth, rolling across communities in waves of destruction that kill thousands but accomplish little else.



The Refugee Crisis

The war in Syria has produced nearly five million refugees. The exodus has created three sets of problems:

1. A **humanitarian crisis** for the refugees themselves
2. A potential **crisis for the countries that host them**
3. A **political crisis in Europe and the United States** over what to do



On April 4, 2017, Assad was accused of dropping chemical weapons on civilians in a rebel-held town in Northern Syria.

As the conflict in Syria worsens, ordinary people are paying the highest price. More than 50 bombs and mortars a day land on some neighbourhoods in Syria. Many are rusty barrels filled with nails and explosives, rolled out the back of government helicopters -- bakeries and markets are the most commonly hit targets. When this happens, volunteers known as the White Helmets rush in to search for life in the rubble - fully aware that more bombs may fall on the same site. These volunteers have saved 78,529 lives - and this number is growing daily.

1. Why is their “former” profession listed under their name? What does this reveal about the effect on lives during a time of war and destruction?
2. The White Helmet’s motto comes from a verse in the Quran, which is “To save one life is to save all of humanity”. Are the White Helmets making a difference?
3. Does the Middle East have to chose between an authoritarian regime and chaos?
4. Putting together what you know about the war in Syria and the information gathered from *The White Helmets*, how can the Syrian Civil War be resolved?
5. Should the U.S. get involved in the Syrian Civil War? Do you think the U.S. is more likely to help or hurt?

The Fall of Aleppo

