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Eurasia Brief

Syrian Civil War Fact Sheet

Eurasia Center - Middle East Program



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Syrian Rebels in captured Syrian Tank

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Introduction and Background:

Initial stages of the Syrian Civil War began in March 2011 amidst the Arab Spring. Initially, the protestors desired to greater democratic processes, to reduce the number of political prisoners, and end of corruption. ¹However, by early April, demonstrators called for the overthrow of the President Assad's Government; by April 22, protests occurred in 22 cities. In response, the

¹ Syria Profile - Timeline." *BBC News*, January 14, 2019, sec. Middle East. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703995>.

government cracked down on the protests with the army, leading to hundreds of deaths and the detainment of thousands of political figures.²

Phase I: Intra-Syrian Conflict: July 2011 to January 2014

The Syrian Civil War and the insurgency against the Assad government began around July 2011, when the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a group of anti-government ex-Army officers declared the establishment of anti-governmental army. The conflict escalated after failure of the UN peace process (April to June 2012), and thousands were killed across the country.³ Characterized by governmental airstrikes on major cities, the conflict became increasingly violent, especially in the major cities. The government had significant losses during the first months of 2013, losing the major town of Raqqa to the rebels and the oil fields in Northeastern Syria to the Kurdish forces. In a series of successful counter-offensives in at the end of 2013, however, governmental forces used mustard gas in the suburbs of Damascus, leading to international outcry and sanctions.⁴ Generally, however, by the end of the first phase of the conflict, the war was at a stalemate.

Phase II: The Rise of the Islamic State and Intervention by the United States: April 2013 to Present

On 8 April 2013, Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the formation of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and on 29 June 2014, proclaimed itself a worldwide caliphate.⁵ The Caliphate reached its height in May of 2015, when it controlled about 30% of Syria and 40% of Iraq, including the major cities of Raqqa and Palmyra.⁶ In response, the United



² United States Institute of Peace. "Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad." <https://www.usip.org/syria-timeline-uprising-against-assad>.

³ "Syria Profile - Timeline." *BBC News*.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State | Wilson Center." <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state>.

States and its allies began to arm the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Kurdish rebels, as well as carry out airstrikes on major ISIS targets. ⁷The Islamic State, opposed by the American-backed Kurds, Russian-backed Syrians, and a Turkish-backed local coalition began to suffer severe setbacks, especially the loss of its capital of Raqqa in October 2017.⁸

Phase III: Russia Intervenes: September 2015 to Present

On 30 September 2015, President Assad requested military assistance from Russia. Soon thereafter, Russia began airstrikes on anti-government forces in Syria, both the Islamic State and the Free Syrian Army. ⁹With the assistance of Russia, the regime began to end the stalemate and began cutting the supply lines between rebel forces and Turkey. In 2016, with the assistance of indiscriminate munitions and the targeting of medical facilities, the Russian-backed Syrian forces were able to recapture the city of Aleppo.¹⁰



⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ United States Institute of Peace. "Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad."

¹⁰ "Syria Profile - Timeline." *BBC News*.

Phase IV: Turkish Intervention & Government Successes: August 2016 to Present

Turkey invaded and occupied Northern Syria on August 24, 2016.¹¹ While denounced by the Syrian Government, Turkish President Erdogan claimed that such a move was necessary to protect against the twin threats of the Kurds and the Islamic State.¹² Turkey began arming anti-governmental rebels, but an agreement was struck in 2017 between Russia and Turkey to create a buffer zone between the rebels and government forces.¹³ In 2019, Turkey invaded Kurdish-held Syria, in an attempt to damage the Kurdish PKK Terrorist group, as well to create a zone for the repatriation of Syrian refugees in Turkey. However, Turkey has largely avoided direct confrontation with the Syrian Government, except in February 2020 when dozens of Turkish soldiers were killed by a Syrian airstrike, followed by Turkish retaliation.¹⁴



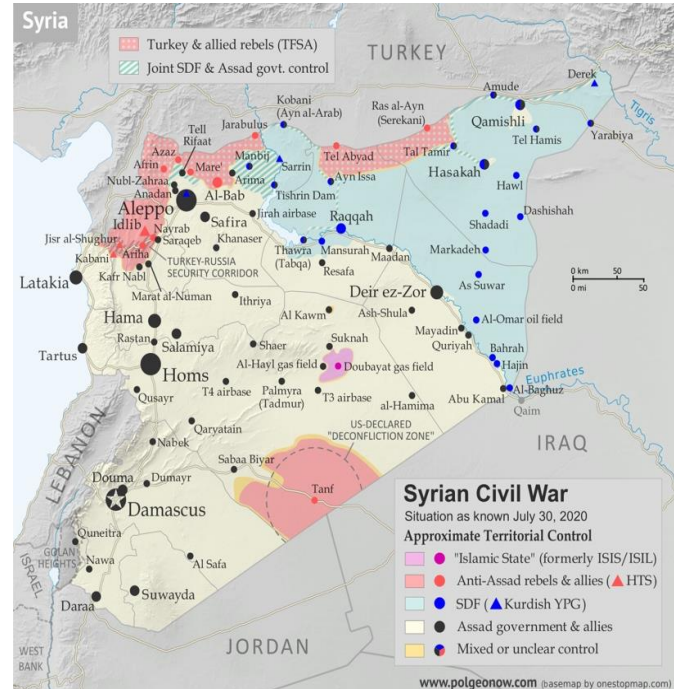
¹¹ Ibid

¹² United States Institute of Peace. “Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad.”

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ United States Institute of Peace. “The Current Situation in Syria.” <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/08/current-situation-syria>.

Current Situation



The State of the Syrian Civil War: July 2020 ¹⁵

Today, the Syrian Civil War is largely over, with a victory for government-led Syrian Forces. However, fighting in Northeast Syria (Idlib Province) between Syrian governmental and rebel forces assisted by Turkey continues today. On October 25, 35 Turkish-backed rebel fighters were killed by a Russian airstrike, which observers have called a “significant escalation.”¹⁶ Experts also worry about a resurgence of the Islamic State, which had largely been defeated militarily. However, with the multinational coalition against them bickering and fighting among each other, such a possibility seems more likely.¹⁷

The next steps for the Assad government will be extremely important. While it has largely won the militarily conflict, the humanitarian crisis Syria faces. According to the United States

¹⁵ “Syria Control Map & Report: Frontlines Stable - July 2020.” <https://www.polgeonow.com/2020/07/syria-controlled-areas-map-2020.html>.

¹⁶ Najjar, Farah. “Russian Strike on Syria’s Idlib Fighters a ‘Message’ to Turkey.” <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/27/russian-strike-in-syrias-idlib-a-message-to-ankara>.

¹⁷ “Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State | Wilson Center.”

Institute of Peace, out of a 26 million pre-war population, 13 million Syrians have been internally displaced, and 5.6 million are refugees.¹⁸ The cost of rebuilding will be astronomical, with some experts estimating as much as a trillion dollars. Coronavirus has spread quickly in Syria, and with its impact on governmental finances worldwide, reconstruction might last decades.¹⁹ Assad has won the war, now he must win the peace – or risk conflict and destroy the country even further.

Key Actors

Syrian Arab Republic: Opposed to Al-Nusra Front, ISIS, FSA, SDF. Supported by Russia, Iran, Hezbollah. Seeks the maintenance of power by the Assad regime

Syrian Opposition, SDF and the Free Syrian Army: Opposed to Al-Nusra Front, ISIS, Syrian Arab Republic. Supported by the United States, Turkey. Seek the overthrow of the Assad regime. The SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) and the Free Syrian Army are the military forces which support the goals of the Syrian Opposition.²⁰

Russia: Opposed to Al-Nusra Front, ISIS, Syrian Opposition. Supports Syrian Arab Republic. Carried out airstrikes against both the Islamic State and Syrian Opposition. Proxy conflict with Turkey in Northeast Syria.²¹

Turkey: Opposed to Al-Nusra Front, ISIS, Syrian Arab Republic, Kurds. Supports Syrian Opposition. Intervened Northern Syria 2016 and 2019. In geopolitical competition with Russia in Syria.

United States: Opposed to Opposed to Al-Nusra Front, ISIS, Syrian Arab Republic, Hezbollah, Iran. Supports Kurds and the Syrian Opposition. First involved in Syria to stop the rise of the

¹⁸ “The Syria Civil War Might Be Ending, but the Crisis Will Live On.” <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/insights/28041/the-syria-civil-war-might-be-ending-but-the-crisis-will-live-on>.

¹⁹ Asseburg, Muriel and Stiftung Wissenschaft Und Politik. “Reconstruction in Syria: Challenges and Policy Options for the EU and Its Member States.” *SWP Research Paper*, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.18449/2020RP11>.

²⁰ United States Institute of Peace. “Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad.”

²¹ Ibid

Islamic State. Assisted by global coalition. Retaliation against Syrian government for its use of chemical weapons 2017. Proxy conflict with Russia and Iran in Syria.²²

Iran: Led by Hassan Rouhani. Supports Syrian Regime and Hezbollah. Opposed to Al-Nusra Front, ISIS, Israel, Syrian Opposition, Kurds. Close strategic allies with Syria. Armed the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and the Quds Force to both defeat the YPG, Islamic State and the Syrian Opposition. Supports Hezbollah and other militia groups in their struggle with Israel.²³

Israel: Led by Benjamin Netanyahu. Opposed to Al-Nusra Front, ISIS, Syrian Arab Republic, Hezbollah, Iran. Mostly concerned with Iranian-backed militias near Israeli borders. Carried out several airstrikes against Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies.²⁴

The Kurds and YPG: Opposed to Al-Nusra Front, ISIS, Turkey. Seeks self-governing autonomous region in Eastern Syria and Iraq. Supported by the United States and its allies. Temporary alliance with the Syrian Arab Republic for assistance against Turkey. Kurdish army known as the YPG, or the People's Protection Forces.²⁵

Al-Nusra Front or Jabhat Fatah al-Sham: Salafi Jihadist Terrorist Organization in Syria. Split with the Islamic State. Active in Turkish-controlled Northeastern Syria. Seen as most dangerous Syrian opposition force. Opposed to Syrian Arab Republic, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Israel, and the Kurds. Supported by Qatar.²⁶

²² "Syria Profile - Timeline." *BBC News*.

²³ United States Institute of Peace. "Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad."

²⁴ "Syria Profile - Timeline."

²⁵ Council on Foreign Relations. "Civil War in Syria: Global Conflict Tracker." <https://cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/civil-war-syria>.

²⁶ "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) | Center for Strategic and International Studies." <https://www.csis.org/programs/transnational-threats-project/terrorism-backgrounders/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-hts>.

Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant: Salafi-Jihadist terrorist organization. Arose 2013 and controlled large portions of Syria and Iraq in 2015 before largely defeated by multinational coalition. Experts worry ISIL will reemerge due to continued instability in Syria.²⁷

Timeline

February 2011: Initial protests

March 24, 2011: Dozens of protestors killed when security forces fire at protest in the city of Dar'a

April 12, 2011: Initial governmental use of heavy weaponry against the protestors

July 29, 2011: Disaffected Syrian Army Officers announce the formation of the Free Syrian Army and urge other disaffected officers to defect and join the protestors.

September 27, 2011: First clash between Government forces and Free Syrian Army. Civil War begins.

June 22, 2012: Turkish jet shot down by Syrian Forces. Increased tensions between Syria and Turkey.

August 21, 2013: Syrian governmental forces use chemical weapons in the suburbs of Damascus

June 30, 2014: Islamic State Leader Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi declares it ISIL a caliphate

December 22, 2016: Syrian governmental forces recapture Aleppo

October 17, 2017: SDF Forces, assisted by US Airstrikes, retake the Islamic State Syrian capital of Aleppo

May 2018: Israel attacks Iranian military installations in Syria, prompting a response and counter-response

June to October 2018: Syrian governmental offensive and creation of rebel-held buffer zone in Idlib Province

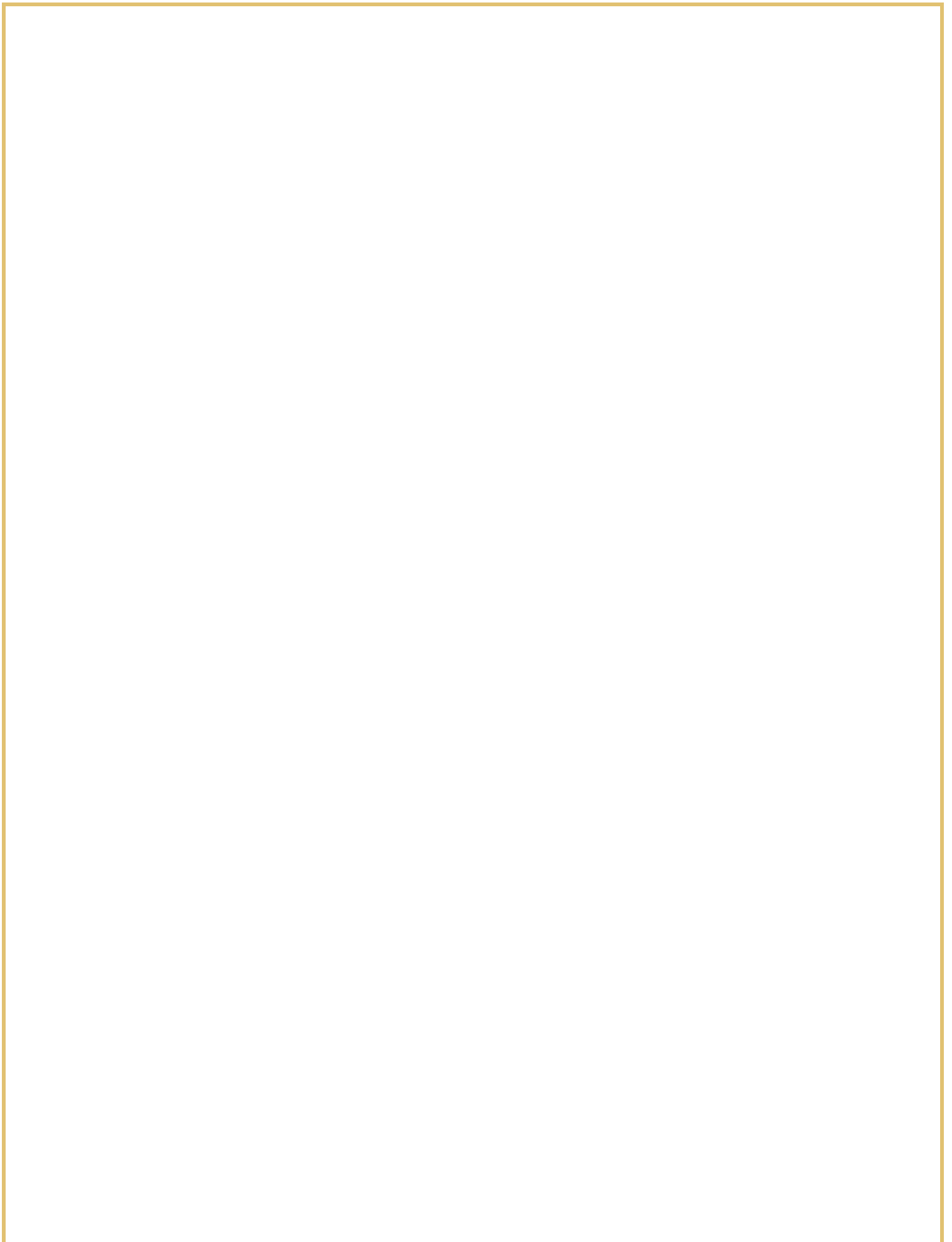
²⁷ "Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State | Wilson Center."

October 9, 2019: Turkish invasion of the Kurdish region of Syria, unopposed by the United States

February - October 2020: Proxy conflicts between Turkey and Russia in Syria. Turkish-backed rebels attacked by Russia; Russian-backed rebels attacked by Turkey.

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