

Syrian Civil War

Syrian history

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In March 2011 [Syria's](#) government, led by Pres. [Bashar al-Assad](#), faced an unprecedented challenge to its authority when pro-[democracy](#) protests erupted throughout the country. Protesters demanded an end to the authoritarian practices of the Assad regime, in place since Assad's father, [Hafiz al-Assad](#), became president in 1971. The Syrian government used violence to suppress demonstrations, making extensive use of police, military, and paramilitary forces. Opposition militias began to form in 2011, and by 2012 the conflict had expanded into a full-fledged civil war. In this special feature, Britannica provides a guide to the civil war and explores the historical context of the conflict.

Uprising

In January 2011, Syrian Pres. Bashar al-Assad was asked in an interview with *The Wall Street Journal* if he expected the wave of [popular protest](#) then sweeping through the Arab world—which had

already unseated authoritarian rulers in [Tunisia](#) and [Egypt](#)—to reach Syria. Assad acknowledged that there had been economic hardships for many Syrians and that progress toward political reform had been slow and halting, but he was confident that Syria would be spared because his administration's stance of resistance to the [United States](#) and [Israel](#) aligned with the beliefs of the Syrian people, whereas the leaders who had already fallen had carried out pro-Western foreign policy in defiance of their people's feelings.

The onset of antiregime protests, coming just a few weeks after the interview, made it clear that Assad's situation had been much more precarious than he was willing to admit. In reality, a variety of long-standing political and economic problems were pushing the country toward instability. When Assad succeeded his father in 2000, he came to the presidency with a reputation as a modernizer and a reformer. The hopes that were raised by Assad's presidency went largely unfulfilled, though. In politics, a brief turn toward greater participation was quickly reversed, and Assad revived the authoritarian tactics of his late father's administration, including pervasive censorship and surveillance and brutal violence against suspected opponents of the regime. Assad also oversaw significant liberalization of Syria's state-dominated economy, but those changes mostly served to enrich a network of crony capitalists with ties to the regime. On the eve of the uprising, then, Syrian society remained highly repressive, with increasingly conspicuous inequalities in wealth and privilege.

Environmental crisis also played a role in Syria's uprising. Between 2006 and 2010, Syria experienced the worst drought in the country's

modern history. Hundreds of thousands of farming families were reduced to poverty, causing a mass migration of rural people to urban shantytowns.

It was in the impoverished drought-stricken rural province of [Dar'ā](#), in southern Syria, that the first major protests occurred in March 2011. A group of children had been arrested and tortured by the authorities for writing antiregime graffiti; incensed local people took to the street to demonstrate for political and economic reforms. Security forces responded harshly, conducting mass arrests and sometimes firing on demonstrators. The violence of the regime's response added visibility and momentum to the protesters' cause, and within weeks similar nonviolent protests had begun to appear in cities around the country. Videos of security forces beating and firing at protesters—captured by witnesses on mobile phones—were circulated around the country and smuggled out to foreign media outlets.



Syria: antigovernment protesters wearing Syrian rebel flags during a demonstration in Homs, Syria, December 2011. *AP*

From early on, the uprising and the regime's response had a sectarian dimension. Many of the protesters belonged to the country's [Sunni](#) majority, while the ruling Assad family were members of the country's [Alawite](#) minority. Alawites also dominated the security forces and the irregular militias that carried out some of the worst violence against protesters and suspected opponents of the regime. Sectarian divisions were initially not as rigid as is sometimes supposed, though; the political and economic elite with ties to the regime included members of all of Syria's confessional groups—not just Alawites—while many middle- and working-class Alawites did

not particularly benefit from belonging to the same community as the Assad family and may have shared some of the protesters' socioeconomic grievances.

As the conflict progressed, however, sectarian divisions hardened. In his public statements, Assad sought to portray the opposition as Sunni Islamic extremists in the mold of [al-Qaeda](#) and as participants in foreign conspiracies against Syria. The regime also produced propaganda stoking minorities' fears that the predominately Sunni opposition would carry out violent reprisals against non-Sunni communities.

As the protests increased in strength and size, the regime responded with heavier force. In some cases this meant encircling cities or neighbourhoods that had become hubs of protest, such as Bāniyās or [Homs](#), with [tanks](#), [artillery](#), and attack [helicopters](#) and cutting off utilities and communications. In response, some groups of protesters began to take up arms against the security forces. In June, Syrian troops and tanks moved into the northern town of Jisr al-Shugūr, sending a stream of thousands of refugees fleeing into Turkey.

By the summer of 2011 Syria's regional neighbours and the global powers had both begun to split into pro- and anti-Assad camps. The United States and the European Union were increasingly critical of Assad as his crackdown continued, and U.S. Pres. [Barack Obama](#) and several European heads of state called for him to step down in August 2011. An anti-Assad bloc consisting of Qatar, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia formed in the last half of 2011. The United States, the EU, and the [Arab League](#) soon introduced sanctions targeting senior members of the Assad regime.

Meanwhile, Syria's long-standing allies [Iran](#) and [Russia](#) continued their support. An early indicator of the international divisions and rivalries that would prolong the conflict came in October 2011 when Russia and China cast the first of several vetoes blocking a UN Security Council Resolution that would have condemned Assad's crackdown.

Syrian Civil War

QUICK FACTS

DATE

- February 2011 - present

LOCATION

- [Syria](#)

PARTICIPANTS

- [Free Syrian Army](#)
- [Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant](#)

CONTEXT

- [Arab Spring](#)

KEY PEOPLE

- [Vladimir Putin](#)
- [Bashar al-Assad](#)
- [Barack Obama](#)

RELATED TOPICS

- [Hezbollah](#)

DID YOU KNOW?

- When the Syrian Civil War began, the four main warring factions were ISIS, Kurdish forces, the Assad government, and other opposition groups.

- Hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees have returned to their homes, often only to be displaced a second or third time.

Civil War

Although it is impossible to pinpoint when the uprising turned from a predominately peaceful protest movement into a militarized rebellion, armed clashes became increasingly common, and by September 2011 organized rebel militias were regularly engaging in combat with government troops in cities around Syria. The [Free Syrian Army](#), a rebel umbrella group formed by defectors from the Syrian army in July, claimed leadership over the armed opposition fighting in Syria, but its authority was largely unrecognized by the local militias.

ARAB SPRING EVENTS

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Jasmine Revolution

December 17, 2010 - January 14, 2011



Yemen Uprising of 2011–12
January 27, 2011 - 2012



Syrian Civil War

February 2011 - 9999



Libya Revolt of 2011

February 15, 2011 - 9999

Late 2011 and early 2012 saw a series of ill-fated efforts by international organizations to bring the conflict to an end. In early November 2011 Syrian officials agreed to an [Arab League](#) initiative calling for the Syrian government to stop violence against protesters, remove tanks and armoured vehicles from cities, and release political prisoners. In December 2011 the Syrian government agreed to permit a delegation of monitors from the Arab League to visit Syria to observe the implementation of the plan. The observer mission quickly lost credibility with the opposition as it became clear that not enough monitors and equipment had been sent and that the Syrian government had presented the monitors with orchestrated scenes and restricted their movements. Amid concerns for the monitors' safety, the Arab League ended the mission in January 28.



Syria: Arab League monitor An Arab League monitor watching a demonstration in Idlib, Syria, December 2011. *Reuters/Landov*

A second agreement, this time brokered by former UN secretary-general [Kofi Annan](#) and sponsored by the UN and the Arab League, produced a short partial cease-fire in April 2012. But violence soon resumed and reached higher levels than before, and the UN team of monitors, like their Arab League predecessors, had to be withdrawn for security reasons.

Having had little success in creating peace between the combatants themselves, the UN and the Arab League sought to enlist the international powers in support of a political settlement to the conflict.

In June 2012 an international conference organized by the UN produced the Geneva Communiqué, which provided a road map for negotiations to establish a transitional governing body for Syria. The United States and Russia were unable to agree on whether Assad would be included in a future Syrian government, though, so this was left unspecified.

By early 2012 it was becoming clear that the [Syrian National Council](#) (SNC), an opposition umbrella group formed in Istanbul in August 2011, was too narrow and too weakened by infighting to effectively represent the opposition. Much of the infighting was the result of crosscutting streams of support flowing to different rebel factions as donor countries' efforts to prioritize their own agendas and maximize their influence over the opposition created conflicts and prevented any single group from developing the stature to lead. After months of contentious diplomacy, in November Syrian opposition leaders announced the formation of a new coalition called the [National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces](#). Over the next month the coalition received recognition from dozens of countries as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. The divisions and rivalries that had plagued the Syrian National Council were nevertheless still present in the new organization.

The summer and fall of 2012 saw a string of tactical successes for the rebels. Government troops were forced to withdraw from areas in the north and east, allowing the rebels to control significant territory for the first time. In July rebels attacked [Aleppo](#), Syria's largest city, establishing a foothold in the eastern part of the city. By early 2013, though, the military situation appeared to be approaching stalemate. Rebel fighters kept a firm hold on northern areas but were held back

by deficiencies in equipment, weaponry, and organization. Meanwhile, government forces, weakened by defections, also seemed incapable of making large gains. Daily fighting continued in contested areas, pushing the civilian death toll higher and higher.

With no decisive outcome in sight, the international allies of the Syrian government and the rebels stepped up their support, raising the prospect of a regional proxy war. Efforts by [Turkey](#), [Saudi Arabia](#), and [Qatar](#) to fund and arm rebels became increasingly public in late 2012 and 2013. The United States, which had been reluctant to send weapons for fear of inadvertently arming radical jihadists who would someday turn against the West, eventually started a modest program to train and equip a few vetted rebel groups. The Syrian government continued to receive weapons from [Iran](#) and the Lebanese militant group [Hezbollah](#). By late 2012 Hezbollah had also begun sending its own fighters into Syria to battle the rebels.

There were new calls for international military action in Syria after suspected chemical weapons attacks in the suburbs of Damascus killed hundreds on August 21, 2013. The Syrian opposition accused pro-Assad forces of having carried out the attacks. Syrian officials denied having used chemical weapons and asserted that if such weapons had been used, rebel forces were to blame. While UN weapons inspectors collected evidence at the sites of the alleged chemical attacks, U.S., British, and French leaders denounced the use of chemical weapons and made it known that they were considering retaliatory strikes against the Assad regime. [Russia](#), China, and Iran spoke out against military action, and Assad vowed to fight what he described as Western aggression.

The prospect of international military intervention in Syria began to fade by the end of August, in part because it became evident that majorities in the [United States](#) and the [United Kingdom](#) were opposed to military action. A motion in the British Parliament to authorize strikes in Syria failed on August 29, and a similar vote in the U.S. Congress was postponed on September 10. Meanwhile, diplomacy took centre stage, resulting in an agreement between Russia, Syria, and the United States on September 14 to place all of Syria's chemical weapons under international control. The agreement was carried out and all declared chemical weapons were removed from Syria by the agreement's deadline of June 30, 2014.

In 2013 Islamist militants began to take centre stage as the non-Islamist factions faltered from exhaustion and infighting. The Nusra Front, an [al-Qaeda](#) affiliate operating in Syria, partnered with a variety of other opposition groups and was generally considered to be one of the most-effective fighting forces. But it was soon overshadowed by a new group: in April 2013 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of [al-Qaeda in Iraq](#), declared that he would combine his forces in Iraq and Syria under the name [Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant](#) (ISIL; also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria [ISIS]). He evidently intended for the Nusra Front to be part of the new group under his command, but the Nusra Front rejected the merger, and the two groups ended up fighting with each other.

In eastern Syria, ISIL seized an area in the Euphrates valley centred on the city of Al-Raqqah. From there, ISIL launched a series of successful operations in both Syria and Iraq, expanding to control a wide swath of territory straddling the Iraq-Syria border.

ISIL's sudden advances in Iraq, which were accompanied by a steady stream of violent and provocative propaganda, added urgency to the international community's calls for action. On August 8 the United States launched air strikes in Iraq to prevent ISIL from advancing into the autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq and to shield Christian and Yazīdī communities there. The strikes slowed the group's advance, but a series of videos showing ISIL fighters beheading Western aid workers and journalists amplified fears that the group posed a global threat. On September 23 the United States and a coalition of Arab states expanded the air campaign to strike ISIL targets in Syria.

In the summer of 2015, Russia began to take a more-active role in the conflict, deploying troops and military equipment to an air base near Latakia. In September Russia launched its first air strikes against targets in Syria. Russian officials originally claimed that the air strikes were targeting ISIL, but it quickly became clear that they were targeting mostly rebels fighting against Assad, with the intention of bolstering their ally.



Aleppo, Syria: injured boyA child sitting in an ambulance after his home was destroyed by an air strike in Aleppo, Syria, August 2016. *Aleppo Media Center/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images*

After a short cease-fire between Russian and Syrian government forces and Western-backed rebels collapsed in September 2016, Russia and the Syrian government forces turned their focus to the rebel-held eastern part of Aleppo, unleashing a fierce bombing campaign. Russian and Syrian forces made no attempt to avoid causing civilian casualties in their efforts to subdue the rebels; warplanes dropped indiscriminate munitions such as cluster bombs and incendiary bombs and targeted medical facilities, search and rescue teams, and aid workers. Those actions were condemned by

human rights groups, but they continued unabated until the rebels in Aleppo collapsed in December.

By 2016 ISIL, which only a few years earlier had appeared to be nearly unstoppable in northern and eastern Syria, was beginning to collapse under the strain of its simultaneous confrontations with three rival coalitions—Kurdish forces and their American allies, pro-Assad Syrian forces supported by Iran and Russia, and a Turkish-backed coalition of rebel groups. In the north, Kurdish and Turkish-supported forces gradually consolidated their hold on the areas along the Turkish border, depriving ISIL of a strategically important territory. Meanwhile, an escalating U.S.-led air campaign weakened ISIL's grip on key strongholds. ISIL's ideological rivals, including the [Nusra Front](#), merged into [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham](#) (HTS) and together fought ISIL in Idlib, capturing territory held by ISIL in the area. In June 2017 the mostly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) launched an assault on Al-Raqqah, ISIL's de facto capital in Syria, with support from U.S. air power and special forces. In October the SDF announced that Al-Raqqah had been cleared of ISIL forces. In the east, Assad's forces continued to pressure ISIL, forcing them out of Dayr al-Zawr in November 2017.

While government forces continued to gain ground, Western governments increasingly intervened in the conflict. After a chemical weapons attack was carried out in Khān Shaykhūn in April 2017, the United States barraged Shayrat air base near Homs with 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles. A year later, after the Syrian government used chemical weapons in Douma, U.S., British, and French forces launched more than 100 strikes targeting chemical weapons facilities near Damascus and Homs.

Israel targeted the Iranian military in Syria in 2018. After Iran shelled the [Golan Heights](#) in response, Israel launched its heaviest barrage in Syria since the civil war began. Dozens of Iranian military sites were targeted, and Israel claimed to have destroyed nearly all of Iran's military infrastructure in Syria.

In June 2018, having solidified their hold on the areas around Damascus and Homs, Syrian government forces began a campaign to recapture rebel-held territories in the southwest province of Dar'ā, later expanding into [Al-Qunaytirah](#) province. As the success of the government operation became clear, a deal was brokered with the help of Russia that allowed rebels safe passage to the rebel-held province of [Idlib](#) in the north in exchange for their surrender in southwest of the country.

Idlib was the last remaining region of the country that the rebels held, and the belligerents all began to brace themselves for an imminent clash. Aside from the government's ability to now focus its military on recapturing just one region, and its history using chemical weapons, Turkey's military presence in support of the rebels helped guarantee that any government offensive would be met by a tough fight. Both Turkey and the Syrian government began to amass troops along the borders; Turkey reinforced its military within the province, while Syrian and Russian warplanes bombarded border towns.

Russia and Turkey attempted to de-escalate the situation by agreeing to and implementing a buffer zone between rebel and government forces. The buffer zone required all heavy weaponry and fighters to retreat from an area about 9 to 12 miles (15 to 20 km) wide. It was unclear at the time whether all parties would observe the deal, a top-down agreement. The Syrian government and mainstream rebel

groups, such as the Free Syrian Army, quickly embraced the buffer zone agreement. Groups sympathetic to al-Qaeda's ideology, such as HTS, remained wild cards, though they appeared to signal that they would comply. They quietly pulled heavy weaponry from the buffer zone, though many fighters appeared to remain past the October 15 deadline.

As part of the agreement, Turkey was responsible for preventing the most radical groups, such as HTS, to prosper in the region. HTS, however, launched an offensive against other rebel groups in January 2019 and soon became the dominant force in Idlib. In April Syrian forces crossed the buffer zone and began an offensive in Idlib with the help of Russian air strikes. They captured territory before a counteroffensive launched in June was able to push the battle back into government-controlled areas.

In October the conflict expanded eastward. Turkey launched an offensive into Syria's Kurdish-held northeast region, days after the United States announced that it would not stand in the way. The country aimed to destabilize Kurdish separatists in Syria who were allies of the [Kurdistan Workers' Party](#) (PKK) in Turkey and to make a safe zone in the region for the repatriation of Syrian refugees in Turkey. Kurdish forces quickly forged a deal with Assad for assistance, allowing government forces to re-enter the region for the first time since 2012.

Although Turkey had largely steered clear of direct confrontation with the Syrian government throughout the conflict, the Syrian government offensive in Idlib, backed by Russian air strikes, sometimes led to Turkish casualties and retaliation. In late February 2020 the conflict escalated briefly after dozens of Turkish soldiers were killed in an air

strike and Turkish forces retaliated directly against the Syrian army. The confrontation soon ended, however, after a general cease-fire was negotiated by Turkey and Russia a week later.