



### History

In early 2011, Syrians began a peaceful uprising against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The Assad regime cracked down with extreme violence, which escalated into civil war. Initially, the main parties in the conflict were the Assad regime versus the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the democratic opposition. However, Islamist extremist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS soon entered the war, and the FSA struggled to preserve its influence. Hezbollah, a militant Islamic party based in Lebanon, also began fighting on behalf of the Assad regime, and Kurdish militias took a more active role in the conflict in an attempt to establish and protect their own territory.

The war has splintered Syria into many fragments, with no side strong enough to take power over the entire territory. The Assad regime remains the main perpetrator of atrocities, responsible for barrel bomb and chemical weapons attacks, and an extensive system of torture. The conflict has prompted the world's largest displacement crisis, with 10.9 million people displaced in total, including four million refugees.

### International Action

Many international actors with differing interests have helped shape the conflict. Assad's supporters include Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, all of whom have provided arms and funds to the regime. Russia has worked to stall international action against Assad, using its UN Security Council veto four times since the beginning of the conflict. In 2015, Russia led the formation of an anti-ISIS coalition consisting of Russia, Iran, Iraq, and the Assad regime. It has since launched a rigorous airstrike campaign, which was created on the basis of attacking ISIS, but which has also targeted civilian areas, including schools and hospitals, and moderate rebels who oppose the Assad regime, including those backed by the U.S.

The U.S. opposes Assad and has sent aid and support to more moderate rebel groups, though its actions in the region have been limited by the complex nature of the conflict and a reluctance to conduct military operations beyond anti-ISIS airstrikes. Turkey and Saudi Arabia also oppose ISIS and have escalated their engagement in the conflict, but unlike the U.S., Turkey strongly opposes the Kurds. Turkey, along with Lebanon and Jordan, have collectively taken in approximately four million Syrian refugees.



### Key Terms

**Syrian Government:** An autocracy controlled by President Bashar al-Assad. Assad has shown a willingness to hold on to power at all costs, with no concern for civilian suffering.

**Free Syrian Army (FSA):** Syria's primary democratic opposition group, made up mostly of soldiers who defected from the Syrian military after the revolution. They have struggled to maintain influence in recent years, fighting both ISIS and Assad.

**Jabhat al-Nusra:** A major Islamist extremist group and al-Qaeda's affiliate in the region. While not quite as extreme as ISIS, it still holds rigid views and commits extensive violence against civilians. Al-Nusra conducts operations with the FSA and other rebel groups, and opposes both ISIS and Assad.

**Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS):** Also known as ISIL and Daesh, ISIS is a militant Islamist group that aims to establish an Islamic state. It has expanded due to the political instability of the Syrian Civil War. ISIS has faced increased struggles to maintain territory, but has expanded terror attacks in Iraq and Syria as well as around the world.

**Kurds:** An ethnic group with significant populations in Syria, Iraq, and Turkey. Primarily through the YPG militia, Kurds have sought to gain autonomy and defend themselves from Assad and rebel groups. The PKK, a Turkish Kurdish group, is close to YPG and seen as a terrorist group by Turkey.