

Syria

Ed. Note: Numbers cited are from U.S. government sources, specifically the Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), unless otherwise noted. The United Nations stopped counting casualties in July 2013, due to the difficulty of making accurate estimates.



The civil war in Syria is the greatest humanitarian crisis in the world. With millions displaced, more than 100,000 dead, extremists flocking to the fight, and refugees pouring over borders, the conflict poses threats to the stability of the region and American security.

The “intervene” vs. “do nothing” public debate is a false choice that stifles the smart use of non-military tools to hasten an end to the crisis. The United States has a leadership role to play in ending the violence, assisting refugees, negotiating a settlement, and supporting

moderate rebel groups – but we can't do it alone or dictate the terms.

What should we do? The U.S. should continue to lead international efforts to stop the violence and secure a negotiated political transition, based on a Syrian-led vision for the future. Even when peace talks stall, the U.S. and the international community should continue to work to bring to the table the representative parties that can achieve a lasting and sustainable end to the conflict, respectful and inclusive of all Syrians. Concurrent with these political efforts, the U.S. should provide non-lethal aid to the Syrian opposition figures that oppose the Assad regime and extremist Islamist groups, as well as expand our humanitarian assistance. We should work with Syria's neighboring countries to end their governmental support for violent extremists, and instead coordinate with these countries to provide vetted military aid to non-extremist groups. Finally, the U.S. should expand cooperation with security forces in countries neighboring Syria to stop the terrorist threat within Syria from jeopardizing our regional allies, or from establishing Syria as a safe haven for al Qaeda or other extremists to stage terrorist attacks against U.S. interests or other targets worldwide.

Key Issues

The conflict can be viewed through many lenses. Though it began as a peaceful democratic uprising, similar to those in Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain, and Tunisia, Syrian President Bashar al Assad's choice to brutally repress the civilian population has led to a civil war, a sectarian conflict, and even a regional proxy war in which Shi'a Iran fights against Sunni countries, such as Saudi Arabia and others. To view this conflict

as only one of those without the rest will yield at best an incomplete, and possibly a deeply flawed, understanding of the factors at play.

Syria is both religiously and ethnically diverse. President Assad and most of the Syrian government and military senior leadership are Alawite – a sect closely related to Shi’a Islam, which represents about 13% of the population. 74% percent of Syrians are Sunni Muslims (most of whom are ethnic Arabs, though some are ethnic Kurds). The remaining 13% of Syrians are Christians, Druze – a monotheistic religion related to Islam – and other religious minorities. Most Alawites and Christians support Assad’s regime, while many Sunnis support the opposition. The Druze remain evenly divided. It is important to note that these are generalities: there are many Alawites and Christians who support and fight for the opposition, and many Sunnis who remain loyal to the government.

Current diplomatic efforts to reach a negotiated political solution are focused on a series of conferences known collectively as “Geneva II.” The first two rounds of Geneva II took place in Switzerland in January and February 2014, respectively. As of March 2014, a third round is planned. Included in the conference are not only representatives of the Syrian government and Syrian opposition, but also 39 other countries, including most other countries in the region, as well as the U.S. and Russia. So far, negotiations have been hampered by the fact that Syria’s government feels little pressure to negotiate, since it is currently winning on the battlefield.

The Syrian civil war gives violent extremists a place to gather, organize, and train, and Syria could become a safe haven for terrorists to plot external attacks, including on U.S. partners and interests.

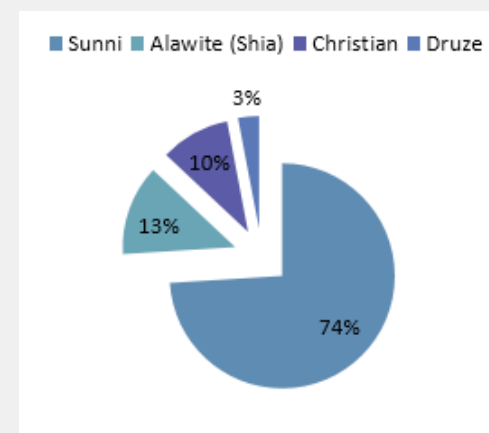


There is no silver bullet that will end the crisis in Syria. Being responsible means proposing a plan, not just being critical of the situation.



In 30 seconds...

Sectarian Demographics of Syria



Thanks to external support, particularly from state and non-state actors in the Gulf, as well as violent extremist groups, including al Qaeda, the extremists in Syria are often the strongest and best equipped of all of the rebel forces operating in the country. This makes them attractive for people looking to join the fight against the Assad regime. In addition to being very popular in recruitment, they are also very effective on the ground. The logistical ability of extremist groups outpaces the moderate rebel groups by far. This entices many moderate rebels to switch sides and join the ranks of the extremist fighters. This is a worrying trend: although most Syrians in the opposition do not support the radical interpretation of Islam promoted by these extremist groups, there is a serious risk that Syrian rebels may be radicalized through their interactions with and support for the extremists. This is especially the case if there are few moderate groups able to give them the opportunity to defend themselves and their communities.

At the same time, pro-Assad extremist groups have also joined the battle in Syria. Chief among these groups is Hezbollah, a Shi'a political party-cum-militia based in Lebanon. Hezbollah receives major support from Iran, which fears losing regional influence to Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab states. Other Shi'a-aligned violent extremist groups fighting in Syria include Iraqi Shi'a militias that have crossed the border into Syria. The support these groups offer Assad gives him little incentive to negotiate, making a political settlement much more difficult. Additionally, the training, arms, and experience these groups gain in Syria could have a destabilizing effect when the foreign fighters among them return home to Lebanon and Iraq.

Sunni extremists also pose a threat to their home governments when they return from Syria. Violent extremists battle-hardened by



Key Fact

External Support

Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other Persian Gulf countries are supporting anti-Assad forces with weapons and funding while non-state groups from these countries provide fighters. This is an extension of Shi'a vs. Sunni conflict and a proxy war between Saudi Arabia, which is anti-Assad and Iran, long an Assad supporter.



In 30 seconds...

Humanitarian situation

As of March 2013

- 9.3 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance.
- 9.1 million Syrians have been driven from their homes by the violence.
- 6.5 million Syrians live under constant threat of starvation and bombardment.

Estimates from USAID

months or years of fighting in Syria could have a destabilizing effect when they return to Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Lebanon, and other countries in the region. Perhaps most worrying is the fact that thousands of foreign fighters are coming to Syria from European countries and could easily return to their home countries with operational experience in carrying out terrorist attacks. It is not difficult to imagine how an extremist with a European passport could pose a direct threat to the U.S. and its interests.

USAID estimates that almost 10 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, and that over 6 million remain under constant threat of starvation and bombardment. Most of these internally displaced people (IDPs) live in conditions of severe deprivation. Many have lived in refugee camps or improvised communities for months or even years. Due to the lack of adequate food, water, and sanitation, outbreaks of disease pose a major threat to human security. As of February 2014, the United Nations confirmed 23 cases of polio in Syria, spread across at least four cities. The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared polio an emergency in Syria, warning that it threatens to undermine the half-century of progress made towards a polio-free world.

Homs, called the “capital of the revolution,” has been under siege by the Syrian government for almost two years. This is true for most population centers around the country, with reports of civilians eating grass to survive and others dying of starvation. Increasingly, violent extremist groups like al Nusra Front are also responsible for blocking the delivery of humanitarian aid. Media reports have also accused Syria’s government of manipulating humanitarian aid to further its battle aims. In February 2014, the U.N. Security Council unanimously approved a resolution that “demands that all parties, in particular the Syrian authorities,



When extremist groups are the only source of food or safety, desperate people are more easily recruited.



Syria’s neighbors need help with refugees and the spread of violence. We need to make sure these problems don’t grow to threaten the U.S. and our allies.

promptly allow rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian access for U.N. humanitarian agencies.”

Refugees fleeing Syria into neighboring countries have also had profound effects on the region. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has yet to receive enough funding to handle the influx of Syrian refugees into neighboring countries in the Middle East. The population of registered Syrian refugees was estimated in March 2014 by USAID to be 962,400 in Lebanon, 584,600 in Jordan, 634,800 in Turkey, 227,000 in Iraq, and 135,000 in Egypt. Meanwhile, UNHCR has only received around 14% of the total funding needed to run the refugee camps.

The human tragedy unfolding in these refugee camps also constitutes a grave security threat. When people are desperate, they can be more easily indoctrinated with radical ideologies, and even non-radical individuals will support radical groups if they are the only source of income, food, or security. Meanwhile, host countries are buckling under the strain that refugees are placing on their infrastructure, economies, and institutions.

Violence has spilled over the border in surrounding countries, threatening to destabilize the region. Iraq, which suffered its most deadly year since 2008, is at risk of further destabilization. Iraq’s large populations of Shi’a, Sunni, and Kurds make it possible for Syria’s sectarian conflict to spill into Iraq and increase sectarian violence there. Iraq’s deputy national security adviser, Safa Hussein, argues that unrest surged dramatically in Iraq’s western Anbar Province in 2013, due to the most radical and violent group, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), succeeding “in rebuilding some of its capacity in some areas [of Iraq].”

Turkey has experienced violence mostly on its southern border due to spillover from military operations in Syria. In September 2013, Turkey announced that one of its fighter planes shot down a Syrian military helicopter that had flown into its airspace.

Lebanon has experienced some of the worst sectarian violence since the end of its 15-year civil war with suicide bombings and political assassinations across the country. In addition, Hezbollah's entry into the conflict has coincided with radicalization among elements Sunni community in Lebanon.

The use of chemical weapons in Syria had been reported for months before it was confirmed in August 2013. On August 21, a chemical attack by Assad's forces on a scale previously unseen took place in the Ghouta area of Damascus, killing approximately 1,300 civilians.

The Obama administration negotiated an agreement with the Assad government and Russia in which Syria's chemical weapons are to be destroyed, but many challenges to fully eliminating these weapons remain. On October 31, 2013, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) announced that it was confident that no additional chemical agents or munitions can be produced in Syria. As of March 2014, 45% of the weapons have been removed. With violence likely to continue, and extremist groups wielding increasing power in parts of Syria, destroying these weapons continues to be an urgent security imperative.



The threat of U.S. military force pushed Assad, and his Russian allies, to give up his chemical weapons of mass destruction.

The Policy Landscape & Recommendations

The U.S. must continue to lead international efforts to facilitate a negotiated political solution. American efforts should be aimed at a political resolution that ends the violence in Syria. This will likely take time. In the short-term, the protection of civilians in Syria remains a moral imperative. Ultimately, the solution must come from the Syrians themselves. Though groups outside Syria have a role to play, peace can only be achieved by parties that legitimately represent the Syrian people. It is critical that the U.S. and European powers bring all relevant parties to the table, repeatedly if necessary, until a sustainable political solution is agreed upon. This includes support for the Geneva process, which is imperfect but still the best way forward. A negotiated political settlement must include a transitional governing body that removes Assad and senior regime figures from power, but ensures protection and representation for communities that will be most vulnerable after Assad is gone. By demonstrating leadership during the Geneva II negotiations, the National Coalition gained credibility both inside and outside Syria, but sustained political and financial support is necessary to help this umbrella group improve their governing capacity and expand their support base.

This won't end with military action from outside. It only ends when Syrians figure out a political solution. We can help make that happen, but we can't force it.

The U.S. should expand non-lethal military assistance to vetted rebel groups. We should continue to provide non-lethal assistance,



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including communications equipment, transportation and logistics support, and even funds to vetted rebel groups that fall under the National Coalition umbrella, including its associated military wing, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and its coordinating network, the Supreme Military Council. Unless Assad feels militarily pressured, he will not have an incentive to negotiate in good faith, and supporting moderate rebel groups helps prevent the growing influence of violent extremists funded by the Gulf States.

The U.S. should coordinate with Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar, to ensure the delivery of military aid to vetted rebel groups and to end the support of state and non-state actors for Sunni extremists. The Assad regime will not have an incentive to negotiate in good faith until there is a shift in the balance of power on the ground. This cannot happen while the Free Syrian Army and other rebel groups are disorganized, especially when fighting a two-front battle against both the Assad regime and extremist organizations like ISIL.

We should continue to lead regional efforts to counter the threat of terrorism emanating from Syria. The U.S. should enhance cooperation with security forces in Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq, so that those countries can effectively counter the threat of violent extremism spilling over into their countries from Syria. The U.S. should also increase coordination efforts with the Gulf countries and Turkey to prevent extremists from leaving those countries to go to fight in Syria. A recent religious edict issued in Saudi Arabia forbidding young Saudi males from going to Syria is just one example of what countries at risk can do to counter the threat of terrorism. Turkey can also increase its efforts to identify and apprehend foreign fighters who are arriving from Europe with the intention of crossing into Syria from Turkey.



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America should expand humanitarian aid and the delivery of non-military security assistance. According to USAID, over 9 million people, including 5.5 million children, are without basic necessities because of the war in Syria. This is not only a humanitarian catastrophe, but a threat to regional stability, and ultimately American security. When deprived of food, water, healthcare, and hope, some Syrian refugees are dependent on extremist groups who over time manipulate this desperation for their own political and strategic objectives. While ending the violence must be the top priority, the U.S. must ensure that Syria's neighbors have the resources they need to adequately provide for Syrian refugees within their borders, and seek opportunities to de-escalate violence whenever possible to allow for food and medical assistance to reach those in need inside Syria.

Unless Assad feels militarily pressured, he will not have an incentive to negotiate in good faith. Supporting moderate rebels helps prevent the growing influence of violent extremist groups.

Continue to lead international efforts to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons. Achieving a deal that required Syria to destroy its chemical stockpiles was an accomplishment for the U.S. and international community, but the practical hurdles to implementing this plan remain. As of March 2014, 35% of Syria's stockpiles have been removed. The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons is making steady progress in a volatile security environment, and the U.S. should continue to support this effort through appropriate diplomatic channels.

Key Players



Syria crossed a red line by using chemical weapons against civilians. Today, we are eliminating their ability to ever do that again.

Local Coordination Committees. Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) are local civil activists that coordinate resistance to Assad's regime through a distributed network. In the early days of the conflict, they organized and documented non-violent protests against the government, coordinated the distribution of humanitarian aid, and helped arm the resistance. Today they operate through a network of Syrian civilian activists, journalists, and community organizers, known as the Local Development and Small Projects Support Office. In some rebel-held areas, they function as local governments. In December 2013, renowned human rights lawyer Razan Zaitouneh, a co-founder of the LCCs and the Violations Documentation Center, her husband Wael Hamada, and colleagues Nazem Hamadi and Samira Khalil, were kidnapped, most likely by an extremist rebel group.

Syrian National Council. The Syrian National Council (SNC) is a coalition of opposition groups formed in October 2011 to represent political opponents of Assad's regime. It served as the point of contact for the international community before the creation of the National Coalition, even holding Syria's vote in the Arab League. Critically, it is overwhelmingly composed of members of the Syrian diaspora, most of who have lived in Europe, the U.S., and Turkey for years. Consequently, many members of the opposition inside Syria, whom the council claims to represent, do not view the SNC as legitimate or able to speak for opposition forces on the ground. The Syrian National Council held 22 seats in the National Coalition, but in January 2014 the SNC withdrew from the Coalition in protest of the latter's participation in the January 2014 negotiations with the Assad's regime in Geneva.

National Council. The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (also referred to as the National Council) is an

umbrella organization composed of many different opposition factions. It was formed as a response to increasing pressure from foreign backers and superseded the Syrian National Council, a previous coalition that was viewed as ineffective due to infighting. The National Coalition is comprised of a network of grassroots opposition activists, representatives of the local revolutionary councils, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the FSA leadership body, the Supreme Military Council. The National Coalition leadership is comprised of President Ahmad Al Assi Jarba, Secretary General Badr Jamous, Vice Presidents Mohamad Farouq Tayfour, Salem Abdel Aziz Al Muslet, and Suheir Jamal Al Atassi, and a 19-member political committee representing diverse opposition forces. The leadership of the National Coalition at the Geneva II negotiations was generally considered to be inclusive and effective. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries were first to recognize the National Council as a legitimate representative of the Syrian people in November 2012, soon followed by France, the United Kingdom, the European Union, and the United States. These countries, along with Germany, Italy, Turkey, Egypt, and Jordan are known collectively as the “London 11” and are currently the primary backers of the National Coalition, supplying funding and political support.

Free Syrian Army. The Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) is made up of Syria’s most important moderate opposition field commanders and relies on the volunteered cooperation from each of its members. The Council was designed to provide a coordinated national strategy for the mostly disparate military forces of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other opposition forces. The command is divided into five geographic fronts with six elected members dedicated to each front. Overall, the command has two centralized departments, an arms committee and a financial committee. The Supreme Military Council receives financial, material, and limited lethal support from Western

and Arab states for the Free Syrian Army. Their primary backers are the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, as well as many non-state organizations and individuals.

Islamic Front. The Islamic Front is an alliance between several Islamist rebel groups formed in November 2013. Their emergence represents a weakening of the Free Syrian Army and a strengthening of extremist Sunni groups in Syria. With an estimated 40,000-50,000 fighters, the Islamic Front is the single largest rebel command. Like other Islamist groups, the Islamic Front aims to replace Assad's regime with a Sunni Muslim state, although their command structure and alliances remain in flux. Unlike the most extreme Sunni groups (i.e. al Nusra and ISIL), the Islamic Front still operates in coordination with moderate and secular rebel groups, including the FSA. Nevertheless, the seizure by the Islamic Front of FSA Supreme Military Council warehouses in December 2013 triggered a suspension of U.S. non-lethal aid.

Al Nusra Front. Al Nusra Front is an al Qaeda-affiliated Sunni extremist group, founded in January 2012 with the help of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). The leader of al Nusra is Abu Mohammed al Golan and with around 6,000 fighters, it is one of the most powerful jihadist groups in Syria. Though it maintains ties with al Qaeda, unlike ISIL, al Nusra does not target moderate or secular rebel groups, and has attempted to gain support from local communities through delivery of basic humanitarian supplies and social services.

Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, sometimes referred to as ISIS) is the most radical Sunni extremist group currently fighting against the Assad regime. ISIL aims

to establish an Islamic state comprised of Iraq and the Levant, with the ultimate goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate across the Middle East. ISIL is known for its uncompromising posture towards other rebel groups, as well as its brutality towards civilians in the regions they control. Its gruesome methods have led to civilian backlash in some areas in the form of protests and even mob attacks against ISIL offices. In February 2014, al Qaeda senior leadership officially denounced ISIL, breaking ties with the organization officially. ISIL is active in Syria's northern and eastern provinces, where it has taken administrative control of towns, imposing an ultraconservative brand of Islamic law. The exact size of the group is unknown but is thought to be comprised of thousands of fighters, mainly foreign jihadists. As of February 2014, ISIL is fighting openly with other rebel groups, even the extreme Islamist groups, like al Nusra.

People's Protection Units. The People's Protection Units (YPG) are the dominant Kurdish armed groups inside Syria, which took over large sections of the north. Although YPG leaders proclaim the group's independence, it is thought to have ties to the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which the U.S. considers a terrorist group. YPG has tried, unsuccessfully, to stay neutral in the Syrian conflict and has been forced into confrontations with extremist anti-Assad forces. In early 2013, the YPG signed a ceasefire with the FSA, which led to an opening of dialog between the two groups. The ultimate goal of YPG is not independence from Syria, but self-governance within Syria similar to the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq.

Hezbollah. Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shi'a political party-cum-militia with key sponsorship from Iran, has played a decisive role on the ground in support of the Assad regime. The group's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, has engaged in increasingly sectarian rhetoric and declared that Hezbollah

militants will keep fighting in Syria's conflict for as long as necessary. It is unclear how many fighters Hezbollah has provided but there have been press reports of funerals held in Syria for Hezbollah soldiers killed fighting alongside government troops. Hezbollah's entry into the Syrian conflict has led to increased sectarian violence in Lebanon, with suicide bombings and political assassinations claiming dozens of lives. Hezbollah has a vested interest in the success of the Assad regime.

Iran. Iran has unfailingly supported the Assad regime both politically and militarily since the beginning of the Syrian uprising. The chief of Iran's elite Quds Force, Qassem Suleimani, is said to be leading Iran's military forces from Damascus and is widely credited with orchestrating the recapture of the strategic town of Qusayr by the Syrian army in cooperation with Hezbollah. Tactical support includes regular clandestine flights between Tehran and Damascus to resupply Assad's forces and expeditionary training missions using Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) ground forces, intelligence services, and law enforcement units. Iran has also played a key role in the formation of the Iraqi Shi'a militia groups active in Syria.

U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon invited Iran to attend the Geneva II peace talks, but later rescinded the offer when Iran refused to accept the Geneva communiqué, which calls for the establishment of a transitional government body. Politically, Iranian officials have repeatedly called for a negotiated solution to the conflict, and formally backed the six-point U.N. plan that was approved on March 28, 2012.

Gulf States. The Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have been strong supporters of the Syrian opposition through funding and arms shipments. States, as well as non-state entities and individuals,

have been charged with empowering many of the most ideologically extreme militant factions, whose radical brand of Sunni Islam is popular in the Gulf. Former Qatari prime minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim al Thani, has been vocally supportive of arming the opposition. Saudi Arabia has been enabling armed factions operating under the auspices of the largely secular Free Syrian Army (FSA) and its Supreme Military Council (SMC), as well as Islamist factions deemed to be unaffiliated with al Qaeda, including the Islamic Front.

Other Gulf States, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, and Bahrain, have supported the Syrian opposition through extensive financial and logistical support to the various political and armed factions.

Russia. Russia has been an ally of Syria for more than forty years, is one of Assad's strongest political and military supporters, and continues to fight Western attempts to put pressure on the Syrian regime. Russia ostensibly favors a negotiated outcome that would lead to a power-sharing structure between the Assad regime and Syrian opposition forces, but only because this would be preferable to Assad's defeat or direct Western intervention in Syria. Moscow is Syria's biggest supplier of arms; between 2007 and 2010, arms sales from Russia reached \$4.7 billion. Today, Russia continues to supply the Syrian military with weapons and equipment while the conflict rages on, arguing that it is not violating any international sanctions, only fulfilling pre-existing contracts that were agreed upon before the conflict began. Russia is also exploiting the Syrian war to reassert its role in international affairs vis-à-vis the U.S., consistently using its veto power at the U.N. Security Council to block any resolution condemning the Assad regime.

Russia's only active naval base outside of the former Soviet Union is

in Syria; losing this base would limit Russia's military reach. Recently, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the need for Russia to modernize its military arsenal, with plans to increase defense spending to around \$770 billion over the next ten years. This massive expenditure includes the purchase of several naval vessels likely intended to project Russian power, including in the Mediterranean from the Syrian coast. A change in Syrian political leadership might threaten Russian access to this naval base, and disrupt longstanding ties between the two countries. Historically, relations between Russia and Syria began with the signing of a secret agreement in 1946 that outlined international support of Syria from Russia and the assistance in creating a national Syrian army. In the decades since, relations between the two countries have been relatively close.