



A neighborhood in Aleppo, Syria, that was under siege from 2012 to 2013. (Flickr Commons/Basma)

Why did the civil war start?

Starting in 2010, protests against authoritarian government in Tunisia quickly spread to other Arab states in North Africa and the Middle East. The widespread protests became known as the “Arab Spring.” In March 2011, the authoritarian regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria imprisoned and tortured 15 young people for writing anti-government graffiti. This sparked protesters in the city of Deraa to demand democratic reforms and the release of political prisoners. Government security forces responded with gunfire, killing four protesters. Then, protests erupted across Syria, and rebels started an armed insurgency in early April to overthrow the government. Just a few months after the Deraa incident, rebels formed the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

How did the civil war escalate so quickly?

Religious differences between the Sunni and Shia sects of Islam have sparked conflict for over a thousand years. The Sunni-Shia divide is also a primary catalyst of the conflict in Syria, where Sunnis make up 60 percent of the population. They have long resented the political and economic power of the minority Shia sect, which includes President Assad. Beginning in 2012, Saudi Arabia and other Sunni nations sent money and weapons to the rebels. Iran, a Shia-controlled nation, sent military aid to Assad’s regime. The civil war has been called a “proxy war,” in which nations fight indirectly against each other through their allies.

Who are the major parties to the civil war?

Bashar al-Assad. Assad is the president of Syria and the successor to his own father, Hafez al-Assad. Bashar's political party is the ruling Baath Party, a secular party that promotes ethnic Arab nationalism throughout the Middle East while also espousing freedom from non-Arab control and influences. Baathists are anti-democratic and support one-party states. Assad's main foreign supporters are Russia, Iran, and the militant Shia Hezbollah faction in neighboring Lebanon.

Extremist Sunni Rebels. Mostly united as the Islamic Front since 2013, Sunni rebels desire to overthrow Assad and establish a state based on Sharia law, or religious law in Islam. Another rebel group, Al-Nusra, is the Syrian branch of the terrorist Al-Qaeda organization founded by Osama bin Laden. These groups' main foreign supporters are Saudi Arabia and other wealthy Arab nations.

Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (aka ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh). ISIS is an organization of radical jihadists that initially formed in Iraq. The leadership of ISIS largely came from ex-military officers who had been part of the Baathist regime overthrown by the U.S.-led coalition that invaded Iraq in 2003. ISIS in Syria broke away from Al-Nusra in 2013 and is active in territories in both Iraq and Syria. The main objective of ISIS is to bring about an apocalyptic war centered in Syria. ISIS uses social media and the Internet to recruit fighters from all over the world. ISIS has grown powerful and wealthy through illicit oil sales, plunder of ancient artifacts, and taxes in the areas it controls. ISIS has developed an ideology even more extreme and brutal than other jihadists. ISIS opposes Assad, non-Muslims, Shia Muslims, and any Muslims anywhere who do not share its strict ideology, including other Sunni rebel groups. ISIS has no foreign state-level supporters.

Moderate Sunni Arabs. Groups such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other Syrians want a more democratic government but have become the weakest faction of rebels. They often ally with extremist groups, like the Islamic Front, because of their shared enemy: Bashar al-Assad. They are strongly opposed to both Assad and ISIS. Their main foreign supporters are the United States and other Western powers.

Sunni Kurds. Kurds are an important ethnic minority in eastern Syria and have long been supported by the U.S. across the Middle East. They are typically moderate Sunni Muslims with a strong ethnic identity. Their main foreign supporters are the United States and other Western powers.

Who are Syria's religious minorities?

Religious minorities in Syria have been heavily persecuted by all Islamist factions. The **Druze** religion is an offshoot of Shia Islam. It is an ethnic religion, which means its adherents are born into the faith. Druze believers live mostly in western Syria and nearby Lebanon and are largely unaffiliated with any particular faction of the civil war. **Yazidism** is also an ethnic, monotheistic religion that shares elements of Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Islam. They speak Kurdish and have allied with the Kurds. **Christians** have also continued to exist in Syria for centuries. These include Assyrians, Armenians, and Greeks. Many have fled, but some support the Kurds. Others side with the Assad regime, and still others fight with moderate Sunni Arabs.

Why is the U.S. involved?

The U.S. has long been an opponent of the Assad regime because of its support of terrorism, such as Hezbollah, and its animosity toward Israel, a close U.S. ally in the region. Additionally, the regime crossed a “red line” by using chemical weapons, which killed hundreds of civilians in August 2013. The U.S. sent aid to the FSA in 2011. The CIA also trained anti-Assad rebels, but rebel groups often clashed with each other due to conflicting funding sources and objectives.

The U.S. is also strongly opposed to ISIS. Since September 2014, the U.S. has coordinated airstrikes (bombing missions) with Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and other nations against ISIS targets in Syria and Iraq. As of November 2015, the U.S. conducted 6,471 out of 8,289 airstrikes against ISIS. The U.S. military also began to fund training for anti-ISIS rebels in 2013, but without much success.

Why is Russia involved?

Syria under the Assad regime has been Russia’s major ally in the Middle East since the Cold War. Russia maintains a major naval base in Syria and supplies weapons to the regime. After ISIS brought down a Russian airliner with a bomb in November 2015, Russia has used airpower, artillery, and special forces to aid the Assad regime against all of its opponents, including ISIS.

What other outside powers are involved?

Iran and Hezbollah (based in Lebanon), the other major Shia powers, have sent money, troops, and weapons to the Syrian government. Turkey has bombed Kurdish territories and even shot down a Russian warplane it claimed was in its airspace. After the ISIS terrorists attacked Paris in November 2015, France became heavily involved in bombing ISIS.