



Since it began, the Syrian conflict has evolved from an organic and largely peaceful uprising against a dictatorial regime, into a full-fledged war with characteristics of a revolution, a proxy war, a civil war, state collapse, an international armed conflict, and a terrorist insurgency all wrapped into one. Syria's conflict has destabilized the Middle East, killed more than 250,000 Syrians, displaced half of the population sending waves of refugees abroad, and laid bare the failings of the United Nations system both in its gridlocked Security Council and its underfunded humanitarian agencies. Syria's future will shape the Middle East, and international politics, for years to come.

The Syrian conflict began in March 2011 in the southern provincial capital of Daraa when a group of teenage boys spray-painted anti-Assad graffiti on the walls of their school. In an attempt to avoid the type of popular unrest that led to the fall of the Egyptian and Tunisian governments, the Syrian regime quickly arrested and tortured the boys, prompting large, peaceful protests in Daraa. The military was called in to repress the demonstrations, surrounding the city with tanks and confronting protesters with violence. This bloody clampdown broke the 'fear barrier' that had gripped Syria for over 40 years of Assad family rule, igniting protests across the country. Demonstrators were labeled as "terrorists" by the Assad regime, and began to take up arms in the face of the increasingly violent response from Syrian security forces. Superficial reforms by the Syrian government did little to staunch the spreading unrest.

The international community expressed concern with the abuses of the Assad government and responded with diplomatic measures including additional sanctions and the recall of many ambassadors throughout 2011 and 2012. But with no threat of direct international intervention, the Syrian government gradually escalated its tactics from snipers, to tanks, to helicopters and warplanes, to barrel bombs, chemical weapons and other non-conventional munitions. Following a massive [sarin chemical attack](#) by the regime that killed nearly 1,500 – mainly civilians – in the suburbs of Damascus in August 2013, Assad agreed to give up Syria's declared chemical weapons stock – at the behest of Russia – to prevent U.S. intervention, but to this day the Syrian regime continues to launch chemical attacks with chlorine and other dual-use chemicals.

**The Regime:** Russian and Iranian support have been crucial to Assad's survival, helping the Syrian dictator rebound from a low point in late 2012, when many predicted that Assad's days in power were numbered. By that point defections, casualties, and a lack of motivation to fight among Syrian soldiers as well as the loss of airfields and decreased resupply capacity had [severely weakened](#) the Syrian military.

Russia has used its U.N. Security Council (UNSC) veto power to protect Assad from an international response. The first of several vetoes by Russia and China came in [October 2011](#) in response to a UNSC Resolution condemning the Assad regime. Russia has also supported the Assad government through the shipment of weapons, spare parts for helicopters, oil, and credit lines. In September 2015 Russia escalated its role by deploying [Russian armed forces](#) to Syria for the first time, and building out at least three military facilities in the coastal region to accommodate its military needs.

Iran is also deeply entrenched in the war, rivaling Russia in its support for the regime. Iran has pulled its proxy [Hezbollah](#) into the conflict, sent in military advisors who shape Assad's strategy, recruited foreign Shiite militias to bolster the failing Syrian military, and extended Assad tremendous material support including weapons, technology, oil, and credit lines.

**The Opposition:** The armed Syrian opposition began to take shape early in the conflict, with the announcement of the [Free Syrian Army](#) (FSA) in July 2011, made up of brigades of mainly Syrian military defectors. Over time it became clear that the FSA was not viable, as funding for the armed opposition poured in from disparate foreign sources whose uncoordinated patronage fractured the armed groups. Much of the financial support for rebel-armed groups in Syria has come from [Turkey](#), Gulf countries

such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, non-state groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and individual donors, with the U.S. and Europe providing limited support. By 2013 there were estimated to be thousands of armed groups across Syria, ranging from moderate to extreme in their political views. The large number of groups and lack of unity amongst funders have led to the development of a highly fractured opposition that has had difficulty coordinating across battlefronts and agreeing on a common political platform. Over time, jihadi movements have become increasingly prominent, crowding out the visible moderates almost entirely by 2015. Of those groups who remain moderate, many have been accused of corruption and warlordism, leaving Syrian civilians with no good options. Admirably, some [peaceful protesters](#) continue their weekly demonstrations even today.

At the most extreme end of the rebel spectrum are [Jabhat al-Nusra](#) (JN) and [ISIS](#). JN, al-Qaeda's official affiliate in Syria, began its activities very early on but kept its AQ affiliation hidden until April 2013, by which time it had already built a reputation on the ground as an effective ally against Assad. ISIS announced its presence in Syria that same month, and by late 2013 it was already focusing most of its attention on fighting against other armed groups instead of the Syrian regime. Since mid-2014, ISIS has dominated international media coverage of Syria and prompted foreign intervention in the form of airstrikes from the U.S.-led Coalition.

The Syrian political opposition exists in exile and has remained largely marginalized and much like the armed opposition, it has been fractured and prone to infighting, undergoing several iterations. The primary political body of the opposition today is the [Syrian Coalition](#), which is headquartered in Turkey. A handful of additional political opposition groups continue to exist alongside the Syrian Coalition, although they are smaller, less inclusive, and have not achieved the same level of international recognition. A few are referred to as the "internal opposition" because they continue to be based in Damascus and are tolerated by the Assad regime.

With Turkey, the Gulf States, and (nominally) the West supporting the opposition, and Russia and Iran supporting the regime, the conflict in Syria has taken on the appearance of a regional or global proxy war. The proliferation of terrorist groups and proxy militias on both sides adds to the complexity and brutality of the conflict. As a result, the conflict in Syria has metastasized into one of the most complex and dangerous challenges facing the global community, and the largest humanitarian crisis of our lifetimes.

**Impacts:** The conflict is spilling across its borders; forcing Syria's neighbors struggle to cope with an overwhelming refugee burden, economic strain, and security threats. As a result, many Syrian refugees have been compelled to relocate several times, and in August and September 2015, European countries faced a stark jump in the number of [asylum seekers](#). Parts of Syria now serve as a safe haven for the global terror movement ISIS, which is recruiting and inspiring violence that reverberates around the world.

As of September 2015, with no realistic prospects for peace talks in sight, the UNSC agreed to support consultations by "[intra-Syrian working groups](#)" on four priority topic areas identified by Special Envoy [Staffan de Mistura](#): safety and protection; political and legal issues; military, security and counterterrorism issues; and continuity of public services and reconstruction and development. These consultations give little hope for a successful political solution to the crisis, since key stakeholders show no signs of coming to a consensus on the devolution of power from the Assad regime to a transitional government body. In an attempt to seize the momentum, Russia began an unprecedented [military build-up in Syria](#) in September 2015, with the goal of preventing the collapse of the Assad regime. Despite Russian claims that it wants to fight ISIS, the presence of Russian [air-air fighter jets](#) and surface-to-air missiles in Syria suggest that the real purpose is deterrence against any Western intervention.

Moving forward it seems clear that Russian intervention and its increased political activity will impact the course of the conflict in Syria, but it is unclear what direction that these actions will take. Russia's proposal that it lead an international [anti-ISIS coalition that includes Iran and Syria](#) has not gained Western support, but there have been signs of increased willingness by some Western leaders to tolerate [Assad remaining in power](#) in the short term. On the ground, the U.S.'s train and equip program for moderate rebels has met with a series of embarrassing failures, and initiatives by other stakeholders such as Turkey appear stalled. On September 30 Russia launched its first air strikes in Syria against non-ISIS rebel targets. This move has the potential to plunge Syria into even further chaos. We will periodically update this Cheat Sheet, in the meantime [visit the TSI blog](#) for current developments.