



Middle East



Peace Conference

Study Guide
for the
Middle East Peace Conference

Topic Area:
The Situation in Syria

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1. Welcoming Letter

Esteemed Heads of State & Heads of Government,

It is with great honor that we welcome you to the Middle East Peace Conference, convened under the auspices of the Rhodes MRC 2025. As we gather to deliberate on the pressing challenges facing our region, Syria, we are reminded of our shared commitment to fostering peace, justice, and stability.

In the wake of President Bashar al-Assad's fall in December 2024, Syria stands at a pivotal juncture. At the same time, the new interim government under President Ahmed al-Sharaa faces the monumental task of rebuilding a nation scarred by over a decade of civil war, which claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and displaced millions. The challenges of redefining Syria's future and trajectory vary and underline the crucial role that the country, as well as regional and international actors, can play in determining what is next for this land of contention.

As leaders entrusted with the well-being of your nations and the broader international community, it is incumbent upon you to actively contribute in the efforts to stabilize and reconstruct Syria. The recent political transition in Syria presents a turning point in Syrian history that creates major uncertainty for the future, taking into account the complexity of the broader region and the different internal and external dynamics. This endeavor necessitates a concerted international effort to rebuild infrastructure, revitalize the economy, and foster an inclusive political transition with the aim of supporting the sovereignty and the unification of a divided nation.

As we embark on our discussions, let's adopt an empathetic, pragmatic, and committed to peace approach. The path ahead is filled with challenges, but through collaborative effort, unwavering resolve and diplomatic engagement, we can contribute to shaping a future for Syria that honors the dignity and rights of all its people. We eagerly await engaging in robust negotiations, confident that our collective efforts will contribute to lasting peace and stability in the region.

In solidarity,

The Board of the Middle East Peace Conference

Iliana AXARLOGLOU, *Chair (Greece)*

Alexandros MOURATIDIS, *Vice-Chair (UN Secretary-General)*

2. Introduction to the Committee

In 2025, amid ongoing instability, unresolved conflicts, and a rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape, the international community has convened an extraordinary diplomatic summit: the Middle East Peace Conference (MEPC). Hosted by Greece on the island of Rhodes and held under the auspices of the United Nations, this high-level gathering brings together the heads of state and government of the region's most influential actors, alongside key international powers.

Rhodes, as host, offers both neutral ground and symbolic resonance, being the location where the 1949 Armistice Agreements were signed between Israel and Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria. Under the UN's patronage, the MEPC calls upon its participants not only to defend the interests of the states they represent but to rise to the challenge of leadership in its most demanding form: choosing dialogue over confrontation, and vision over division.

For decades, the Middle East has endured the toll of war, occupation, displacement, and political fragmentation. Yet despite deep divisions, there is growing recognition that no lasting solution can emerge without collective will, strategic compromise, and a renewed commitment to diplomacy. The MEPC offers a rare opportunity for leaders to break with past stagnation and forge a new vision for regional peace, cooperation, and stability.

The structure of the MEPC reflects the complexity of the task. Over the course of three days, delegates will engage in a series of formal plenary sessions, strategic breakout negotiations, and impromptu consultations. Each leader will represent the official policy stance of their assigned country or organization. These roles demand more than just knowledge of current affairs; they require empathy, diplomacy, and the ability to balance national interests with regional and humanitarian imperatives. While the ultimate goal is to craft a unanimous Declaration, the path to that objective will be neither easy nor linear. Delegates must navigate issues ranging from territorial disputes and refugee repatriation to arms control, water access, border security, religious tensions, economic sanctions, and the broader question of mutual recognition and sovereignty.

The guiding principle of this conference is consensus. Unlike other international forums where majority votes determine the outcome, MEPC requires a unanimous agreement from all participating delegations in order to ratify the final document. This feature is not only a

procedural mechanism; it is a symbolic reflection of the real-world need for broad-based, inclusive solutions in the Middle East. Peace cannot be imposed. It must be built, deliberately, inclusively, and with an eye toward the dignity and needs of all peoples involved.

To support delegates in this endeavor, the conference provides a simulation environment enriched by policy briefs, moderated sessions, and the possibility of emergent crises that challenge initial assumptions and force adaptive thinking. Participants will have to respond not only to the formal agenda but also to the evolving dynamics of the simulation, just as real diplomats must respond to events on the ground. Whether through an unexpected border clash, a humanitarian emergency, or a controversial media leak, delegates will be tested in their ability to lead, compromise, and stand firm when necessary.

This simulation does not seek to replicate past negotiations, but to imagine a breakthrough. At the end of the conference, delegates will aim to produce a multi-chapter Declaration that encapsulates their shared vision for peace in the Middle East. This document may include provisions on the cessation of hostilities, mechanisms for conflict resolution, mutual recognition agreements, frameworks for economic cooperation, demilitarization zones, guarantees for minority rights, and plans for international monitoring. Yet, the content of the final document will be entirely shaped by the decisions and dynamics of the delegates themselves. There is no preordained outcome. The simulation succeeds only to the extent that participants take ownership of the process

The outcome of the MEPC is unwritten. The simulation succeeds only to the extent that participants take ownership of the process. May this be the moment when diplomacy triumphs and a new chapter for the Middle East begins.

3. Introduction to the Topic Area

To this day, Syria remains one of the most complex and deeply impacted countries in the modern Middle East, having endured authoritarian regimes, brutal political practices, internal disputes, intense sectarianism, over a decade of barbaric civil war, mass population displacements, widespread devastations and various foreign interventions, becoming a wide battleground not only for internal disputes and rivalries but also for external interest collisions that stigmatized the area and destabilized the broader region of the Middle East.

Having said that, it is of high importance to address the effector of the issue and its starting point. The wide and rapid spread of the Arab Spring movement, a wave of mass protests and uprisings against deeply entrenched authoritarian regimes in the North African region and across the Middle East that began in 2010, did not leave unaffected the Syrian state. This very state was for decades upon decades under the brutal Ba'athist regime and specifically under Bashar al-Assad's governance from 2000, who enforced brutal authoritarian policies and imposed heavy restrictions to any form of opposition.

Quickly enough, this pro-democracy wave of uprisings, even though peaceful at first, was infiltrated by the various and contradicting interests and aspirations of the diverse ethnic, religious and political reality of Syria. The involvement of the Syrian government, different rebel groups, Islamist extremist groups, Kurdish militias as well as other ethnic and religious minorities rapidly altered the course of the Syrian reality and transformed it into a bloodshed, during which Syrians opposed Syrians. At the same time, the international community, divided once again into spheres of influence and broader alliances, remained inactive, or in a more frank way, inactive in relation to the interest of the Syrian people.

2011 marked a huge turning point to Syria's future. The country would suffer more than a decade of ferocious civil war, becoming at the same time a proxy-war battleground, since its diverse background and being a homeland to numerous factions, enabled multiple external influences to become backers and supporters of different groups, intensifying the division, the hatred and the war of dominance in the name of their geopolitical goals in this very land.

Fast forward to the fall of the Assad regime, late in 2024, the initial goal and struggle for freedom and liberation from the Syrian dictator became a reality. But the well-anticipated relief of the Syrian people was not the direct response in the face of this incident. Extreme

volatility, unstable regional dynamics, insurgency of radical groups, sectarian violence, widely destroyed infrastructures, anarchy and chaos prevailed.

The situation was further exacerbated by the abrupt appearance of a power vacuum, after all these years of authoritarian governance and control, bringing up the question of the Syrian identity and future. Even though the rebel groups and the opposition forces, in general, shared for all these years a common goal, a vision calling for a true Syrian Republic, free of Assad and free of oppression and brutality, Assad's overthrow and disappearance from the political scene brought the Syrian people in front of an unprecedented situation, a challenge to seek and find their new reality and their new identity.

As expected, every single faction had the aspiration to cover this power vacuum filling it up with their own way of ruling the Syrian land. Unity was definitely neither an asset nor a given for the Syrians.

Syria's multidivisional form of internal structure, became as mentioned, an easy way of foreign access into the country's internal situation. As the country and the people weakened more and more due to the exhaustion caused by the war and the different collisions, these circumstances were deemed as fruitful and promising by regional and non regional powers in order to gain prominence and extend their own sphere of influence. Thus, the indirect presence of other states within the state of Syria, and their involvement in a constant hunt of claiming and fulfilling their own aspirations in the land via affiliating with and backing the rebel group, or the faction that suited better their interests, became a normality and transformed Syria into a land of proxy wars. Russia, Iran, the US, Israel, Turkiye, the Gulf States are only a few of the foreign third parties that still determine the Syrian future.

As of now, and on the premise that the composition of this Guide is taking place during the Spring of 2025, it can be deemed with certainty that the sequence of regional and non-regional developments on the Syrian situation will be much further renewed until the conference dates. However, what is already known is that the impact and the consequences of the series of political and military incidents that have directly agonized the land and its people for decades will take time, collective effort, and reformative action in order to start fading away.

4. Glossary

- **Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party:** A pan-Arab political party founded in 1947, which came to power in Syria in 1963. It combined Arab nationalism, socialism, and anti-imperialism, and established the authoritarian regime of Hafez and later Bashar al-Assad.
- **Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS):** A Sunni Islamist group originally affiliated with al-Qaeda (as Jabhat al-Nusra). It became the leading anti-Assad rebel force and assumed power in Damascus after Assad's fall in 2024, forming the interim government under Ahmed al-Sharaa
- **Syrian Interim Government (2024–present):** The transitional governing body established after Assad's fall, led by HTS and al-Sharaa. It aims to reconstruct Syria, organize elections, and navigate international skepticism due to its Islamist roots.
- **Syrian National Army (SNA):** A Turkish-backed coalition of rebel forces established in 2017, active mainly in northern Syria. It supported HTS in the 2024 offensive against Assad and acts as a Turkish proxy to counter Kurdish influence.
- **Axis of Resistance:** An anti-Western alliance composed of Iran, Syria (under Assad), Hezbollah, and other regional actors opposing US and Israeli influence.
- **Mukhabarat:** The Syrian intelligence services under the Ba'ath regime, known for their extensive surveillance, repression, and human rights abuses.
- **Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL):** A jihadist militant group that emerged during the Syrian civil war and sought to establish a transnational Islamic caliphate. Although territorially defeated, it remains a security threat.
- **Proxy War:** A conflict where external powers support different sides within a domestic war to serve their own strategic interests, without engaging in direct warfare.
- **UNDOF (United Nations Disengagement Observer Force):** A peacekeeping mission established in 1974 to monitor the ceasefire and disengagement between Israel and Syria in the Golan Heights area.

5. Legal Framework

5.1. Syria's emergency rule (1963-2011)

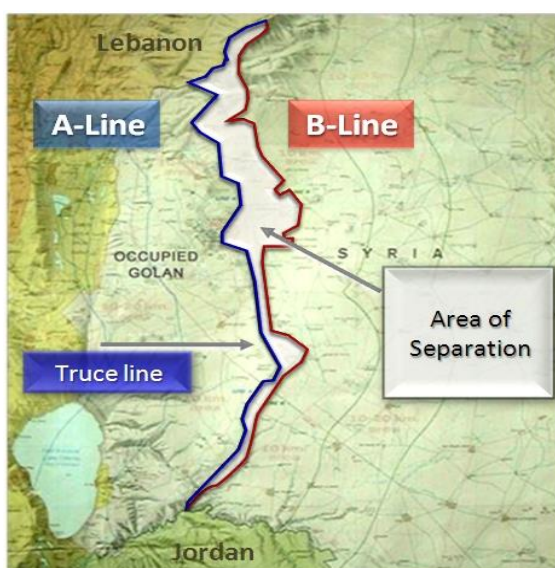
In March 8, 1963, a coup d'état took place in Syria orchestrated and led by the Ba'ath Party along with a coalition of military and arab nationalist officers ideologically supportive of the Arab unity and nationalism idea and committed to an anti-Western strategy, toppled the government of Nazim al-Qudsi and immediately declared Syria under a state of emergency. This came directly with the implementation of emergency laws suspending an array of protective constitutional provisions and granting broad powers to the security national forces and the authority to the new government to impose significant and wide restrictions to an array of human rights and freedoms, for example the freedom of expression and of movement, without a sufficient legal justification. The situation also led to a series of arbitrary arrests and detentions without trial, a very strict control of the media and press, the silencing of any political opposition, and mass land expropriations by the Government.

The Declaration of Emergency took place in 1963, right after the seizure of authority and power by the Ba'ath Party, and lasted 48 years, up to 2011, when the Syrian uprising started flaring up. During that time the head of Government, Bashar al-Assad under the pressure of the Syrian people's uprising lifted the emergency rule, abolished state security courts, and enforced a new legal framework, granting permission to peaceful demonstrations.¹ However, the effect of 48 years of emergency laws, the longest period of time that a country has remained in a state of emergency in recent history, enabled the Ba'ath Party and its leader Assad, to consolidate power and establish a strong authoritarian rule, bearing however the consequences of people's intense reaction to the system's imposition in the form of an acute and completely destructive civil war that would totally alter the course of the Syrian state in the years to follow.

¹ "Syria Protests: Assad to Lift State of Emergency." 2011. BBC NEWS. April 20, 2011. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-13134322>.

5.2. Agreement on Disengagement between Israeli and Syrian Forces(1974) and UNDOF

The Agreement on Disengagement between Israeli and Syrian Forces or else the Golan Heights Agreement was signed in May 31st, 1974, after the Yom Kippur war of 1973, an Arab-Israeli war, during which Israel had to face two main Arab fronts, the first one being Egyptian forces in the Suez Canal and in the Sinai Peninsula and the second being Syrian forces in the Golan Heights area.²



After the tensions in the Golan Heights region reached a critical peak, and after a diplomatic initiative put forward by the United States, the UN brokered ceasefire negotiations between the two parties that concluded in the adoption of the Agreement that had several provisions including military disengagement in a determined area of separation that also called for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the additional territories that were captured during this war within the region of the Heights, the creation of two equal zones attributed

to both sides, in which limited forces and weaponry is permitted, and the establishment of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) that followed the Agreement's adoption with the Security Council Resolution 350.

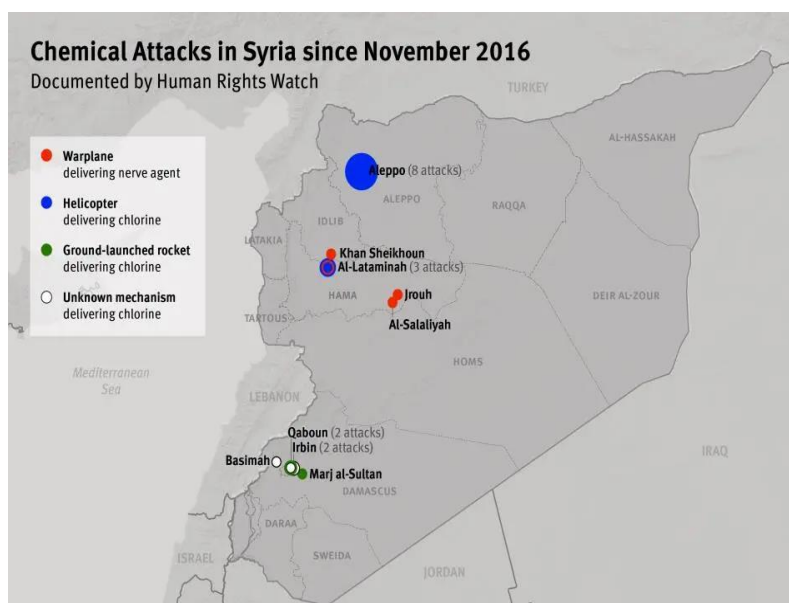
At first the agreement reduced the direct military clashes between the two sides but did not manage to set the basis for the resolution of the territorial dispute.

After the fall of the Assad regime, Israel expanded its military presence in the demilitarized area established by the Agreement claiming security concerns due to Syria's unstable political scene. Currently, Israel is carrying out multiple airstrikes and ground operations that have been condemned by the UN, as they blatantly violate the Agreement's terms as well as hinder UNDOF's operations and monitoring in the region.

² <https://undof.unmissions.org/background>

5.3. Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC)

Syria's relationship with chemical weapons was initiated during the 1970s with the direct assistance of the Soviet Union. By the 2000s, Syria had managed to develop one of the strongest chemical weapons arsenals in the Middle East, including highly toxic chemicals such as chlorine and mustard gas, developing at the same time delivery systems for these weapons.



During the Syrian civil war, the infamous Ghouta attack that took place in 2013 in the suburbs of Damascus was one of the deadliest and most shocking chemical weapons attacks in recent history, which had almost 1,400 casualties and thousands of injuries. This major incident, during which the sarin nerve agent was used, delivered by rockets in populated areas, caused regional and global

outrage and intensified the discussions about possible interventions in Syria and chemical weapons dismantling processes.

Syria acceded to the Chemical Weapons Convention in September 2013, after intense international pressure and after the demand of the UN Security Council, which took the form through the UNSC Resolution 2118, directed at the Syrian Government for the destruction of its chemical weapons arsenal. Despite the accession of Syria to the Convention, chemical weapons use continued to take place in the Syrian battleground by the Syrian Government to repel and limit the influence of the opposition and rebel groups that started to get out of hand. Between 2014 and 2016, the Human Rights Watch reported around 16 Syrian chemical weapons attacks by the Syrian Government, specifically via using chlorine contained in

improvised air-dropped munitions³ and after 2016, around 15 chemical weapons attacks constitute a war crime under international customary law.

Currently, Syria remains under vigorous international scrutiny for its chemical weapons stockpiles. Despite the Syrian Government's declaration in 2014, under the supervision of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), that it had dismantled its chemical weapons arsenal, the above-reported attacks showed otherwise. This led to the imposition of sanctions by the West as well as political pressure for the Syrian Government to comply with the CWC. As these attacks are attributed to the Assad regime that remained in power until December 2024, the new Transitional Syrian Government now calls on the international community to lift these sanctions, characterizing them as outdated and obsolete. However, the Western allies have repeatedly expressed their intense reluctance on this matter, since it is yet unknown if a holistic chemical weapons dismantling has actually taken place, and are exercising pressure on the new Syrian authorities to abide by the provisions of the CWC.

5.4. United Nations Bodies in Syria

The international community's response, led by the United Nations and taking the form of a range of UN bodies that are tasked to manage different dimensions of the crisis, has a central part in the efforts of addressing and handling the Syrian situation and the turmoil of the broader region. Two of these UN mechanisms that have had an active and crucial role in building a sustainable post-conflict future for Syria are the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI).

5.4.1. IIIM (International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism)

³ "Death by Chemicals The Syrian Government's Widespread and Systematic Use of Chemical Weapons." n.d. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/05/01/death-chemicals/syrian-governments-widespread-and-systematic-use-chemical-weapons>.

The International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM), established on December 21, 2016, by the United Nations General Assembly through the adoption of Resolution A/71/248, constitutes a new accountability framework aimed at addressing the growing amount of reports of mass human rights violations on Syrian territory, since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in March 2011. The mandate⁴ of the mechanism is not to prosecute cases that violate international criminal law but rather to lay the groundwork for the conduct of criminal proceedings and provide support to both national and international courts.

This preparatory work is carried out specifically through: a) the collection and preservation of information and evidence regarding violations of international humanitarian law and abuses of human rights; b) the analysis of the collected evidence and preparation of case files to facilitate and expedite fair and independent criminal proceedings; and c) the sharing of collected information, evidence, and analytical reports with national, regional, and international courts.

5.4.2. COI (*Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*)

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI), established on the 22nd of August 2011 by the Human Rights Council, is tasked to investigate all alleged violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law, in Syria since March 2011.⁵ Closely cooperating and exchanging necessary information and data with the IIIM and other human bodies, its mandate is to provide reports of its findings through the collection of evidence, the documentation of abuses, and the identification of those responsible in order to support justice efforts and accountability for the perpetrators.

⁴ “International Impartial and Independent Mechanism.” n.d. United Nations. <https://iiim.un.org/who-we-are/mandate/>.

⁵ “Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic.” n.d. United Nations Human Rights Council. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/iici-syria/independent-international-commission>.

6. Main Discussion of the Topic

6.1. Historical Background

Syria's modern political trajectory was profoundly shaped by the rise of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, founded in 1947 on a platform of Arab nationalism, socialism, and anti-colonial resistance. In the wake of post-independence instability and a series of military coups, the Ba'athists seized power in 1963, embedding their ideology into the fabric of the Syrian state. Internal power struggles culminated in 1970 with Hafez al-Assad's "Corrective Movement," establishing an authoritarian regime characterized by centralized control, an expansive intelligence apparatus (the mukhabarat), and heavy investments in the military. Under Assad, Syria projected power regionally, intervening in Lebanon and resisting Israeli and Western influence, while domestically, the regime crushed dissent—most infamously during the 1982 Hama massacre. His son, Bashar al-Assad, inherited power in 2000, promising modernization but delivering continued repression under the guise of reform.

The eruption of the Syrian uprising in 2011, part of the broader Arab Spring, marked the beginning of the regime's long unraveling. What began as peaceful protests escalated into a brutal, multi-faceted civil war involving domestic factions, jihadist groups, and global powers. Despite early gains by the opposition, Assad clung to power with decisive support from Iran and Russia, recapturing major territory by the late 2010s. The country remained divided, impoverished, and war-weary through the early 2020s. Yet in late 2024, a dramatic rebel offensive—amid regime fatigue and declining foreign support—led to the fall of Damascus and the collapse of Assad's regime after 54 years of Ba'athist rule. This moment marked the end of one of the Middle East's most enduring authoritarian dynasties, closing a violent chapter in Syrian history and opening an uncertain new era.

Founding of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party – First Years of Independence

In 1947, Syria witnessed the emergence of the Arab Socialist Baath Party, founded by Michel Aflaq, Salah al-Din al-Bitar, and Zaki al-Arsuzi.⁶ Rooted deeply in Arab nationalism, socialism, and anti-colonial ideals, the Baathists aimed to unify the Arab world under one socialist state.⁷ That period was, however, marred by intense waves of instability, characterized by a series of military coups between 1949 and 1954, reflecting the deep divisions in Syria's political and military elite. The dictators that ruled during that period were mainly military Colonels with no ideological commitments. The coups ended with the overthrowing of Col. Adib al-Shishakli by Col. Faisal al-Attasi, who restored Parliament.⁸ During the Suez Crisis (Second Arab-Israeli War), Syria became a formal ally of the Soviet Union in November 1956, as a direct result of the war.⁹

United Arab Republic

The Baathist quest for unity briefly materialized in 1958 when Syria, under the leadership of the Baath Party, and Egypt entered into a political union, forming the United Arab Republic under the leadership of the Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. As a result, Syria gave up its sovereignty. It was the de facto "Northern Province" of the United Arab Republic for the next three and a half years, while political parties within the former state were forced to cease overt activities. However, ideological conflicts as well as the Egyptian treatment of Syria led to extreme tensions, which were heightened after a Syrian drought that decimated the economy. The Syrian military coup of 1961 resulted in the new independent Syrian state and the dissolution of the United Arab Republic.¹⁰

⁶ George, Alan. *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*. London; New York: New York: Zed Books; Distributed exclusively in the USA by Palgrave, 2003. p. 66

⁷ Salem, Paul. *Bitter Legacy: Ideology and Politics in the Arab World*. 1st ed. Contemporary Issues in the Middle East. Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 1994.

⁸ "Syria - Media, Publishing, Culture | Britannica." Accessed April 10, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Syria/Media-and-publishing>.

⁹ torontosun. "Syria Hasn't Changed, but the World Has." Accessed April 19, 2025. <https://torontosun.com/2012/02/10/syria-hasnt-changed-but-the-world-has>.

¹⁰ Britannica, op. cit.

The Baathist Coup of 1963

The intense instability that followed the coup of 1961 led to the Baathist seizure of power through a new military coup, known as the March 8 Revolution of 1963. Mostly Ba'ath Party members formed the new government. The newly established Syrian government initiated discussions with both Egypt and Baath-controlled Iraq about forming a federation. On April 17, 1963, the three parties signed an agreement in Cairo to hold a unity referendum in September of that year. However, deep ideological and political disagreements quickly surfaced, derailing the plan for a tripartite federation. In the aftermath, Syria and Iraq shifted focus toward establishing bilateral unity. These efforts were short-lived, collapsing in November 1963 after the Baathist regime in Iraq was toppled.¹¹

The governance of Syria under the Baath Party has been characterized as a totalitarian dictatorship, since the Baathists were in total control over the country's politics, culture, and religion, and used the Military Intelligence Directorate of Syria, the Mukhabarat, to surveil the total of civil society through its secret police branch.¹²

Internal factions within the Baath Party soon erupted, leading to a violent intra-party coup in 1966 that brought the neo-Baathist radical far-left wing, led by Salah Jadid and Hafez al-Assad, to power and sidelined the party's original founders. Jadid was Syria's ruler from 1966 to November 1970, when Assad deposed him. At the time, Assad was serving as the Minister of Defense.¹³

The Rule of Hafez al-Assad

Assad's era was marked by the centralization of power, strengthened by an extensive network of intelligence agencies (Mukhabarat) and a heavily controlled economy. Its

¹¹ U.S. Department of State. "Syria (05/07)." Accessed April 11, 2025. [//2009-2017.state.gov/outofdate/bgn/syria/85051.htm](https://2009-2017.state.gov/outofdate/bgn/syria/85051.htm).

¹² Wieland, Carsten. *Syria and the Neutrality Trap: The Dilemmas of Delivering Humanitarian Aid through Violent Regimes*. London [England]: I.B. Tauris, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755641420>.

¹³ Seale, Patrick. *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East*. Rev. Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 1995.

extensive modernization and heavy investments also marked it into the Syrian Military, which more than doubled in size during the first 10 years of his rule.¹⁴ His rule was further defined by the 1973 Yom Kippur War against Israel, which bolstered his domestic legitimacy and regional stature. Assad's intervention in Lebanon's civil war in 1976 underscored Syria's expanding regional influence.¹⁵

A defining moment of Assad's ruthless hold on power came in 1982 with the suppression of an Islamist uprising in the city of Hama. Known as the Hama Massacre, the Syrian military brutally crushed the Muslim Brotherhood rebellion, killing more than forty thousand people and solidifying Assad's authoritarian grip.¹⁶

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Assad continued to rule through repression, though he occasionally hinted at liberalization, reforms largely failed to materialize amid the entrenched system of political control and patronage.

The Presidency of Bashar al-Assad before the Revolution (2000-2011)

After the death of Hafez al-Assad on the 10th of June 2000, his son Bashar al-Assad was elected President of Syria in an election in which he had no political opponent.¹⁷ Assad assumed power amidst promises of reform and modernization, initiating a brief period known as the Damascus Spring. Yet, hopes for democratization quickly evaporated as Assad's regime reverted to familiar patterns of repression, after imprisoning the main intellectuals of the movement.¹⁸

International pressure intensified following Syria's opposition to the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, prompting

¹⁴ Dahi, Omar S. "Syrian War Economies." *Middle East Law and Governance* 16, no. 3 (October 17, 2024): 346–58. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763375-20241479>.

¹⁵ Droz-Vincent, Philippe. "Syria: Coup Politics, Authoritarian Regimes, and Savage War." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, by Philippe Droz-Vincent. Oxford University Press, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1857>.

¹⁶ Phillips, David L. *Frontline Syria: From Revolution to Proxy War*. London New York Oxford New Delhi Sydney: I.B. Tauris, 2021.

¹⁷ U.S. Department of State. "Syria (05/07)." Accessed April 19, 2025. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/outofdate/bgn/syria/85051.htm>.

¹⁸ George, op. cit.

Syria's forced withdrawal of its approximately fourteen thousand troops from Lebanon after nearly three decades.¹⁹

The Arab Spring and the Beginning of the Syrian Civil War

In early 2011, a wave of pro-democracy uprisings known as the Arab Spring swept through the Middle East, toppling long-standing rulers in Tunisia and Egypt and inspiring protests across the region. At the beginning, Syria appeared insulated from the Arab Spring, with President Assad even stating in an interview in January 2011 that Syria's anti-Western stance aligned with its popular sentiment, implying that it would certainly avoid the fate of other Arab regimes.²⁰

However, the deep-seated grievances of the Syrian people, including political repression, economic inequality, and social distress, changed the narrative and proved Assad to be overconfident about the political stability of his country. In March 2011, the Arab Spring reached Syria when small pro-democracy demonstrations erupted. Triggers came in the southern city of Daraa, where 15 teenagers were arrested and tortured for spray-painting anti-regime graffiti, an event that provoked the outrage of the public.²¹

Peaceful protests started in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and other cities, with demonstrators calling for civil liberties and an end to the authoritarian rule of the Assad family. The regime responded with a brutal crackdown, with security forces opening fire on crowds and carrying out mass arrests, even as protesters chanted "peaceful, peaceful" to show that they were unarmed.²² Assad's regime killed dozens of Syrians in the first weeks, fueling nationwide

¹⁹ "Syria Sidesteps Lebanon Demands." March 6, 2005. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4322477.stm.

²⁰ "Syrian Civil War | Syrian History | Britannica," April 16, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Syrian-Civil-War>.

²¹ "Syria's 'graffiti Boy' Recalls Start of Deadly Conflict." Accessed April 19, 2025. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/life/syrias-graffiti-boy-recalls-start-of-deadly-conflict/1088949>.

²² "We've Never Seen Such Horror." *Human Rights Watch*, June 1, 2011. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2011/06/01/weve-never-seen-such-horror/crimes-against-humanity-syrian-security-forces>.

anger. What began as a hopeful and nonviolent uprising in the spring of 2011 rapidly began to shed its peaceful character under the weight of regime repression.²³

By summer 2011, the discontent in Syria had morphed into open conflict. Some soldiers of the Syrian Arab Army refused to open fire on civilians and defected. By July, a group of deserters announced the creation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to protect protesters and fight the regime. As clashes intensified, sectarian and ethnic fissures festered. The predominantly Sunni Muslim opposition faced a regime dominated by Assad's Alawite minority, with ethnic and religious minorities often fearful of the upheaval. Over the latter half of 2011, the unrest evolved into a civil war. Armed rebel units and local defense militias coalesced in various provinces, and by September 2011, the once-peaceful protest movement had become an armed insurgency engulfing much of the country.²⁴

In 2012, the conflict escalated. Large parts of the territory in northern and eastern Syria slipped from government control as rebels seized towns and military bases. By mid-2012, intense battles raged in Syria's major cities, with an opposition stronghold emerging in Homs, a city that was named the "Capital of the Revolution. In July 2012, rebel fighters launched an offensive in Aleppo, Syria's most populous city.²⁵ There was also a lot of heavy fighting and high-profile attacks in Damascus, while the most notable was the July 2012 bombing that killed several of Assad's top security officials and marked the first strike at the regime's inner circle.²⁶

Assad's government, supported heavily, militarily and financially, by Iran and its Lebanese ally Hezbollah, tried to crush the disparate rebel groups.²⁷ Diplomatic attempts to halt the violence began immediately after the Civil War, but met with little success. Kofi Annan, a joint United Nations & Arab League envoy, succeeded in brokering a six-point peace plan and a

²³ "Syrian Civil War | Syrian History | Britannica," April 16, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Syrian-Civil-War>.

²⁴ *ibid*

²⁵ Staff, Al Jazeera. "What Happened in Syria? How Did al-Assad Fall?" Al Jazeera. Accessed April 16, 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/8/what-happened-in-syria-has-al-assad-really-fallen>.

²⁶ "Conflict in Syria | Global Conflict Tracker." Accessed April 17, 2025. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-syria>.

²⁷ "Conflict in Syria | Global Conflict Tracker." Accessed April 17, 2025. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-syria>.

brief ceasefire in April 2012. An international conference in Geneva in June 2012 between US, Russian, and other central power officials agreed on a roadmap towards peace named the “Geneva Communiqué”, which envisioned a transitional governing body for Syria. However, Assad refused any transition that removed him from power, and the fragmented opposition would settle for nothing less. As a result, fighting continued.²⁸

The Involvement of Terrorist Groups & the Escalation of the Civil War

By 2013, the Syrian Civil War had already evolved into a multifaceted war of multiple fronts. Radical jihadist organizations thrived in the security vacuum. In January 2012, an al-Qaeda affiliate called Jabhat al-Nusra entered the fray, while in 2013, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) began seizing territory in Syria amid the chaos. ISIS capitalized on the power vacuum and sectarian polarization. In this climate, it managed to seize Raqqa and other eastern Syrian cities, while in June 2014, ISIS’s leader declared a transnational “Caliphate” spanning the areas it controlled in Syria and Iraq.²⁹ The rise of ISIS added yet another terrifying dimension to the Civil War. The group's tactics and massacres, including the genocide against Iraq’s Yazidi minority and repression of Syrian communities, drew global alarm.

In August 2013, the Assad regime was accused of launching a massive chemical weapons attack on rebel-held suburbs of Damascus, killing hundreds of civilians with sarin gas. U.S. President Barack Obama had warned that chemical weapons use would trigger direct intervention; although the U.S. stopped short of military action, a Russia-brokered deal forced Assad to dismantle his declared chemical arsenal under UN supervision, averting an American strike.³⁰

Foreign Intervention

²⁸ Al Jazeera. “Syria Diplomatic Talks: A Timeline.” Accessed April 17, 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/9/15/syria-diplomatic-talks-a-timeline>.

²⁹ Council on Foreign Relations, op. cit.

³⁰ Al Jazeera. “Syria Diplomatic Talks: A Timeline.” Accessed April 19, 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/9/15/syria-diplomatic-talks-a-timeline>.

2014 marked a turning point in the conflict, as foreign military interventions began to take place. ISIS's rapid expansion, including the capture of Mosul in Iraq, caused the formation of a US-led Global Coalition to counter the terrorist group. Beginning in 2014, the US and allied countries, including Britain, France, and several Arab states, launched airstrikes against ISIS targets in Syria.³¹

Meanwhile, neighboring Turkey, alarmed both by ISIS and Kurdish gains along its border, began its own interventions. Turkey had supported Syrian rebel factions from the beginning of the Civil War, and had hosted Syrian opposition leaders. In 2016, it sent its army directly into northern Syria (Operation Euphrates Shield) to fight ISIS and block further Kurdish advances. Turkish forces and allied Syrian rebels seized border territory, and Turkey later mounted additional incursions against Kurdish-held areas in 2018-19. Thus, by 2015, the Syrian Civil War had split into multiple interlinked conflicts taking place on Syrian soil: rebel factions vs. the Assad regime, jihadist extremists vs. all sides, and Turkish forces vs Kurdish fighters.³²

Furthermore, in September 2015, at Assad's invitation, Russia intervened directly in the Civil War, in an attempt to give the upper hand to the regime. Russian President Vladimir Putin deployed the Russian Air Force to strike the enemies of the Assad regime, under the pretenses of fighting terrorism. Russian warplanes bombed rebel-held areas relentlessly. This intervention, combined with the stepped-up assistance from the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and fighters of the Lebanese Hezbollah, shifted the war's momentum. Assad's Army managed to go on the offensive once again, and government forces managed to recapture Aleppo by December 2016, after a devastating siege.³³

By 2018, Assad had reasserted control over most of Syria's territory, except for two main zones outside his grasp: the northwest (Idlib province and parts of Aleppo), held by a mix of Islamist rebels and jihadist factions under Turkish protection; and the northeast, held by the

³¹ "Joint Statement Issued by Partners at the Counter-ISIL Coalition Ministerial Meeting." Accessed April 19, 2025. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/12/234627.htm>.

³² Council on Foreign Relations, op. cit.

³³ ibid

Kurdish-led SDF (with a small contingent of U.S. forces supporting them to prevent an ISIS resurgence).³⁴

After the fall of Aleppo and other rebel strongholds, the conflict entered a slower-burning phase: from 2019 to 2023, front lines were relatively static, but Syria remained fragmented and volatile. Idlib province in the northwest became the last major rebel redoubt – controlled by Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a jihadist faction that evolved from al-Qaeda’s former Syrian branch, alongside other Turkish-backed rebels.³⁵

The Fall of Bashar al-Assad

By 2023, Assad’s government, though heavily sanctioned and diplomatically isolated by the West, had begun to reap rewards for its battlefield successes. Several Arab states moved toward normalizing relations with Damascus. Notably, Syria was readmitted to the Arab League in May 2023 after a 12-year suspension, a milestone in Assad’s political rehabilitation regionally.³⁶

Nevertheless, Syria’s internal situation was dire. The economy was in free fall, compounded by warlordism, corruption, and the collapse of Lebanon’s neighboring banking system. The thriving illicit trade in the amphetamine Captagon, reportedly run by Assad’s associates, had become a lifeline for the regime’s finances.³⁷

In late 2024, an unexpected chain of events upended the status quo. In November 2024, jihadist-led rebels in Idlib launched a sudden offensive that would become the war’s final campaign. Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), under commander Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, coordinated with other rebel factions – including the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army and factions like Ahrar al-Sham – to mount a lightning assault dubbed “*Operation Deterrence of Aggression*.” Beginning on November 27, 2024, they attacked regime frontlines in the

³⁴ Britannica, op. cit.

³⁵ ibid

³⁶ Kirk-Wade, Esme, and Philip Loft. “The Syrian Civil War: Timeline, UK Aid and Statistics,” April 19, 2025. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9381/>.

³⁷ Staff, Al Jazeera. “What Happened in Syria? How Did al-Assad Fall?” Al Jazeera. Accessed April 19, 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/8/what-happened-in-syria-has-al-assad-really-fallen>.

northwest. Within three days, opposition fighters shocked the world by seizing Aleppo, which had been in Assad's hands since 2016.³⁸

The breakthrough triggered multiple collapses. Rebel forces, numbering in the tens of thousands, pressed southward. In a matter of days, the cities of Hama and Homs were overrun by rebels, while by the first week of December, the offensive had reached Damascus. The Syrian Army was unable to offer a lot of resistance, with many soldiers fleeing and abandoning their posts rather than fighting for the regime. On December 8, 2024, opposition fighters entered central Damascus. President Bashar al-Assad had fled the capital hours before and took refuge in Russia. After nearly 14 years of conflict, the 54-year rule of the Assad family over Syria had come to an end.³⁹

6.2. The Current Situation in Syria

6.2.1. Latest Updates Following Assad's overthrow

After 13 years of brutal civil war, heavy fighting, mass displacements, chemical weapon attacks, constant alteration of dynamics, external interventions, advances and retreats, in December of 2024 the Assad regime, following a period of prolonged unrest and land claims put forward by the action of all the different rebel groups lying within Syria and fighting against Assad's governance, was toppled by a coalition of rebel forces led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a Syrian Islamist militant group that emerged during the civil war.

The Assad overthrow was an outcome of the significantly weakened international support that he and his government received in the recent years prior to his fall. Russia, had directed its focus on the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Iran, another crucial ally for the government was facing significant setbacks in the area due to its conflict with Israel over Hamas, and Hezbollah, another key-supporter of Assad's struggle against the Syrian rebel groups, was under direct Israeli attacks in south Lebanon and was forced to pull its forces back from Syria in order to defend its front lines. As the Assad regime had lost its significant backing that kept

³⁸ *ibid*

³⁹ *ibid*

it in power during most of the civil war, HTS managed to capture key cities like Aleppo and the capital, Damascus, establishing an interim government with its leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, becoming interim president. Meanwhile, Assad had already fled to Russia, with Moscow confirming the end of his rule.

Immediately after Sharaa seized governing power, the interim president, in an effort to maintain as much stability as possible in the political and military landscape, began to express his intention for a smooth and, above all, inclusive political transition through a constitutional process aimed at reforming and restructuring Syria from the inside. Considering Sharaa's leadership within the HTS and its connection to the terrorist organization Al-Qaeda, the new ruler needed to navigate the deeply unstable and uncertain situation to maintain power.

To this end, his statements about inclusivity and Syrian unity that entails and echoes the voices and the aspirations of all factions, religious, ethnic and political groups for the Syrian future, were necessary, since division and sectarianism were up until then the source of evil that made Syria a cursed land in the eyes of the world.

On the 13th of March 2025, and following the course of an inclusive political transition, Al-Sharaa introduced a constitutional declaration providing the government with significant powers over the judicial and the legislative branch, but also verbally recognizing among others the rights of all minorities and ethnic and religious groups, the social status of women, the structure for transitional justice and mechanisms for the attribution of justice to perpetrators for past crimes in the region. One central area of concern that received wide and acute international criticism was the provision of Sharia (Islamic law) as the primary source of law in the Syrian Republic, as stated in the very first article of the declaration. The aforementioned link of the new government to the terrorist organization of Al-Qaeda, as well as the uncertain and destabilized Syrian political scene, disturbed the international community and, above all, the Syrian people, creating fear and a primary distress signal for the future of the country and its people.

This transitional government, according to the last provisions of the Constitutional Declaration, is intended to govern Syria for a five-year period, the necessary time, according to Sharaa, for Syria to establish a fundamental structure and internal political organization. During these years the ethnically and religiously mixed 23 member cabinet that governs Syria on Sharaa's side, have the mandate to rebuild Syria's infrastructures and State Institutions,

ensure national reconciliation and unity among all communities, organize and prepare the country to hold free and fair elections, facilitate voluntary refugee return, maintain internal security, strengthen economy and ensure inclusive representation.

6.2.2. Current Internal Dynamics and Groups

The rapid ousting of the former Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, and the end of his over 20 years of authoritarian rule did not come out of the blue. Assad managed to sustain his governance and authority, suppress the Arab Spring protests, and contain the rebels via the military support from his allies, Russia, Iran, and the Lebanese militia group, Hezbollah. However, the gradual withdrawal of this backing due to other international developments quickly altered the internal Syrian dynamics, giving the opposition forces a crucial head start.

Despite the -at first- coordination between opposition groups in the Military Operations Command (MOC) coalition led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which was completely incidental, due to an interest alignment between the rebel groups aiming directly at ousting Assad, the ongoing divisions and hostilities among these groups remain a profound threat to the stability and the shaping of Syria's future, during this new post-Assad political order. Though, it remains unknown what this political order will entail, a closer examination of Syria's internal divisions and distribution of power among its groups could provide some insights pertaining to the trajectory of the country's course.

Leading Faction: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a Sunni Islamist group and the dominant rebel force and military power in Syria, has undergone major shifts since its formation as Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliate and a listed terrorist organization by the US State Department and the United Nations. This significant rebranding happened in 2016, and the group that was previously promoting Sharia law and intolerance towards religious freedom now declares an inclusive and accommodative attitude towards Syria's religious minorities, while publicizing its independence and detachment from Jihadist groups and extremist factions. After undergoing

its last transformation and adopting the name HTS, its primary mission and cause were to overthrow the Assad regime and to expel Iranian militias from Syrian soil.

In 2024, HTS, leading a coalition of other Syrian opposition groups, managed to topple the Assad regime and gain prominence in vital cities of Syria, including Aleppo, Hama, Homs, and Damascus. The group's leader, Ahmed al-Shara, the present interim president of the Arab Syrian Republic, has made public statements advocating for a politically inclusive system and unity for the Syrian people, creating international disbelief and concerns due to the group's previous fundamentalist approach.

As a central force in Syria's post-Assad landscape, HTS, while largely self-funded⁴⁰, has built and maintained over the years a network of strategic allies that support its operations. Its main backer appears to be Turkiye, which, despite its initial generalized provision of support to the anti-Assad rebel groups, started directing its support to HTS since 2021, providing logistical support and arms to the group. When it comes to rebel coalitions, and bearing in mind Turkiye's support of the group mainly to diminish the Kurdish presence and influence on the land, the Syrian National Army, an anti-Assad and Turkish-backed rebel group, offered its forces to the HTS during the 2024 offensive that ousted Assad from the country.

Despite its designation as a terrorist organization, HTS has grown its influence in Syria, especially following Assad's overthrow, and has prompted calls for reconsideration of the international stance towards the group, particularly after the guidance given by the special envoy of the United Nations for Syria.

The Syrian National Army (SNA)

The Syrian National Army emerged in 2017 through the unification of other loosely organized rebel groups, aiming to enhance their effective operations on the battlefield and to operate under centralized leadership. It is a coalition of Turkish-backed forces that operates mainly in the Northern Syria region, close to and along the border line with Turkiye.

⁴⁰Frayner, Lauren, ed. 2024. *Who's Been Funding the HTS Rebels Now in Control of Syria?* <https://www.npr.org/2024/12/19/nx-s1-5232809/syria-hts-funding>.

The group's close ties with Türkiye are evident through the participation of the group to the Operation Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch, both of which were military campaigns under the Turkish army leadership aiming at diminishing ISIS and Kurdish presence in Syria.

SNA operates in general as a proxy force of Türkiye in Syria and receives reinforcement and support from the Turkish Government, including training, weapons, equipment and salaries in order to have a strong military presence, especially in northern Syria, where it operates to prevent the Kurdish installation and autonomy near the Turkish borders, as well as the Kurdish militants presence, who are directly linked to the Turkey's Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a considered terrorist organization by the Turkish Government.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

As a coalition of militias, primarily led by the Kurdish-led People's Protection Units (YPG), the Syrian Democratic Forces was established as a group in 2015 with the military support of the United States, as a counterbalance and an opposition force against the advancement of the Islamic State in Syria (ISIS) and it has the most significant role against the anti-ISIS security operations.

SDF's main opponent, though, on Syrian land, besides ISIS, is the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA). Türkiye, considering the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the Kurdish-led People's Protection Units (YPG), and by extension the SDF as a terrorist organization, has launched multiple military operations in the northern part of Syria where the SDF maintains the most of its influence. Thus, collisions between the SNA and the SDF over Northern Syria's control are largely rooted in Türkiye's long-lasting conflict with the PKK and its considered offshoots.

Currently, the SDF maintains under its influence much of northeast Syria. However, an agreement with the Syrian Interim Government has been put forward with the aim of unifying Syria in its post-Assad era. The accord includes provisions for the disarmament and the integration of the SDF forces into the Syrian national army and the territorial unification of Syria, via the transfer of the currently SDF-controlled northeastern region to Damascus's authority, and it is being closely monitored by the Turkish Government.

Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES)

Defended by the Syrian Democratic Forces and being since its foundation in 2014, a self-governing political and administrative system that currently undergoes changes due to Syria's political transition, the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) referred to as Rojava as well, remains a significant Kurdish-led but multiethnic force in the Northeastern region of Syria, that strives for and has aspirations for the establishment of a decentralized democracy, in which power is exercised on a local level following the bottom-up decision making model.

As of 2025, the AANES is still in control of northeastern Syria and has signed an agreement of partial integration with the Syrian interim government, seeking in return the constitutional recognition of their rights, especially to the Kurdish language and to their local self-administration. However, AANES is facing severe tensions with neighboring Türkiye, since the latter rejects any Kurdish-led autonomy near its border and strives to dispel the formation of Kurdish mass establishments in areas close to Türkiye.

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) also known as ISIL (The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) is a Sunni jihadist group, that has been designated by the United Nations as a terrorist organization due to its extremist and fundamentalist ideology and violent expansionist activity that aims at establishing a caliphate, claiming political authority upon the Muslim population.

The presence of ISIS in Syria reached a peak in 2014, during the period that the civil war and the internal clashes brought the country into chaos and a high level of political instability and turmoil. However, at that time, ISIS's expansionism was halted by the military activity of the US coalition in the area, which included the reinforcement of Kurdish regional forces.

Accordingly, and following the overthrow of Assad in December 2024, ISIS, being at the front of a political turbulence due to the regime change in Damascus, bolstered its recruitment efforts, exploiting the initially created power vacuum as well as the absence of a strong, solid

and central political authority. This development, in parallel with the US decision to start a troop decrease policy in Syria, has raised concerns about a potential resurgence of the organization, though it does not currently control any significant territory on the land.

Hezbollah

As a Lebanese Shiite Islamist political and militant group that was founded in 1982, and operating as a resistance and opposition force against Israel's military activities in southern Lebanon, Hezbollah's role particularly in the Syrian civil war was more than significant, taking into account the initial emergence of the group through the Iranian support as well as its close ties with the former Syrian head of Government, Bashar al-Assad.

The group, designated as a terrorist organization by most of the West powers and the Arab League and partially -only its military wing- by the European Union, did not only had a crucial part during key battles, operating in the direct interest of the Assad regime but also had its interests on the Syrian land. From its first steps, Hezbollah received immense military and ideological guidance from Iran that was centered explicitly around countering Israeli and Western influence in the Middle East region. As anticipated, one of the group's primary aims was and still is to promote Iran's aspirations in its field of operations and specifically in Syria to secure and sustain adequate supply routes from Iran through Syria to Lebanon, where its base is.

Another of its objectives in Syria, especially during the civil war, when the Assad regime was the dominant force in the country, was the protection of the Shi'a communities and religious sites but also the countering of the Sunni extremist groups and factions in the area, including ISIS and the Nusra Front, al-Qaeda's former branch in Syria from which the HTS gradually emerged. Following the ousting of Assad from Syria and the establishment of a new transitional Syrian Government that is majorly linked to the HTS group, Hezbollah, losing its close ally in the country, but also aiming to protect its front against Israel in Southern Lebanon, withdrew from Syria. However, and up to this moment, there are several reports of clashes across the Lebanese and Syrian border particularly between Hezbollah and the new transitional Syrian government leading to an agreement signed in April 2025 by the Lebanese

and Syrian defense ministers in Saudi Arabia, with the objective to manage and enhance their security coordination along their shared border.

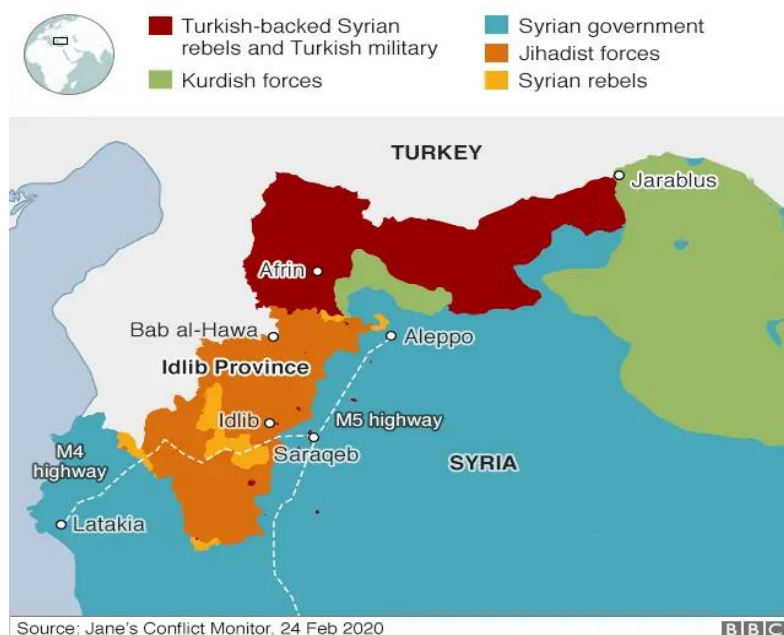
6.3. Key Stakeholders

6.3.1. Regional Powers

Turkiye

Turkiye's involvement in Syria has been intense and significant over the years, even during the Syrian civil war, particularly characterized by national security concerns and other aspirations and interests on Syrian soil.

Idlib province



Considering the Kurdish presence both in Türkiye and in Syria a direct threat to the country's interests and seeing the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) -a Syrian opposition group against Assad- as an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) a designated terrorist organization by the Turkish Government, Türkiye has launched -in the name of protecting its national security- four military operations in northern Syria, with the aim to push the Kurds away

from its borders and southern into Syria as well as to create several so called "safe zones" across its border with the neighboring country.

In 2016, the Operation Euphrates Shield, while targeting the Kurdish presence in northern Syria and the prevention of the formation of territories with a Kurdish majority and influence, also had the objective of removing ISIS from border areas and combating terrorism. The outcome of this first operation was the establishment of a Turkish-controlled area between the Euphrates River and Afrin.

Followingly, the Operation Olive Branch in 2018, having the same anti-Kurdish objective as the previous operation, led the Turkish forces and their proxy on the land, the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), to solidify their military control over Afrin, altering the demographic composition of the region. During the Operation Peace Spring in 2019, the objective was to establish a safe zone by repelling the Kurdish forces away from the Turkish-Syrian border and lastly, the Operation Spring Shield in 2020, an operation carried out in the Idlib region -controlled at the time by Jihadist forces- as a retaliatory act to the Baylun airstrikes⁴¹ conducted by the Syrian Army loyal to the Assad regime that resulted in Turkish casualties.

After the ousting of Assad from Syria in late 2024, Turkiye and its proxy force on the land, the Syrian National Army, launched an offensive -widely known as the Rojava offensive- against the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, managing to capture key areas like Manbij, a city near Aleppo in northern Syria.

Thus, throughout the years Turkiye's involvement in the situation in Syria was based on two basic strategic objectives in the region: a) countering and repelling the Kurdish presence and forces away from its borders and establishing safe zones near them to protect the country's interests and to ensure the voluntary repatriation of Syrian refugees, and b) expanding its regional influence and determining the outcome of the civil war and the internal Syrian collisions in its favor, opposing Assad and its allies, Russia and Iran.

Iran

⁴¹ "Syria War: Alarm after 33 Turkish Soldiers Killed in Attack in Idlib." 2020. BBC. February 28, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51667717>.

Iran's presence and activity in Syria follow a generalized pattern of behavior that is directed against the expansion of the US and Israeli influence ⁴²in the broader region of the Middle East. On this course, Iran's regional strategy falls under the Axis of Resistance, which includes the former Assad regime, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iraqi militias, Iranian-supported factions in Syria, Palestinian military groups, including Hamas, and other regional forces sharing the same anti-American ideology.

Having said that, Iran's regional policy that merges defensive and offensive elements, commonly known as "offensive defence",⁴³ aims to spread Iranian influence in the Middle East as a form of defense against the US and Israeli vision in the area. This strategy is actualized through the establishment of proxy forces across the region in order to repel any potential threats before they reach the Iranian borders and also to ensure Iran's military capacity to perform counterstrikes, if needed.

The arms embargo that was imposed on Iran by the UN Security Council Resolution 2231, prohibiting the export and import of certain conventional weapons, was lifted in 2020. However, up until then, Iran directed its attention to domestically produced military equipment and tools such as drones and long-range missiles, and enhanced the country's capability of constructing nuclear weaponry by enriching its capacity in Uranium isotopes, particularly Uranium-235. Thus, while not having publicly admitted to any intentions for assembling nuclear weapons, Iran is gradually becoming a de facto nuclear threshold state.⁴⁴

During the Syrian civil war, Iran was one of the main patrons of the Assad regime, investing around 50 billion dollars in Syria. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, a specific branch of the Iranian armed forces and especially the Quds Force, is the main unit that had a pivotal role in supporting the Assad regime but also other Shiite proxy militia groups and forces in

⁴² Hamidreza Azizi, Julien Barnes-Dacey. 2024. "Beyond Proxies: Iran's Deeper Strategy in Syria and Lebanon." European Council on Foreign Relations. June 5, 2024. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/beyond-proxies-irans-deeper-strategy-in-syria-and-lebanon/>.

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Zhang, Hui. 2025. "How Quickly Could Iran Build Its First Nuclear Weapon? Look at China." Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. January 22, 2025. https://thebulletin.org/2025/01/how-quickly-could-iran-build-its-first-nuclear-weapon-look-at-china/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

the region, in the prospect of the fall of Assad and as a plan B⁴⁵. Iran, all the way through the Syrian civil war, provided training to these militias to fight on Assad's side. These Iranian-backed groups, and especially the Lebanese Hezbollah, have played a vital role in key battles in Damascus and Aleppo in the Syrian civil war.

Despite the ousting of Assad and the decrease of Iranian influence on the land, Iran remains in Syria since its objective to consolidate and maintain the Axis of Resistance against the Western and Israeli influence remains the country's top priority in the Middle East. Certain military bases and positions in Syria are currently the main target of Israeli airstrikes⁴⁶.

Israel

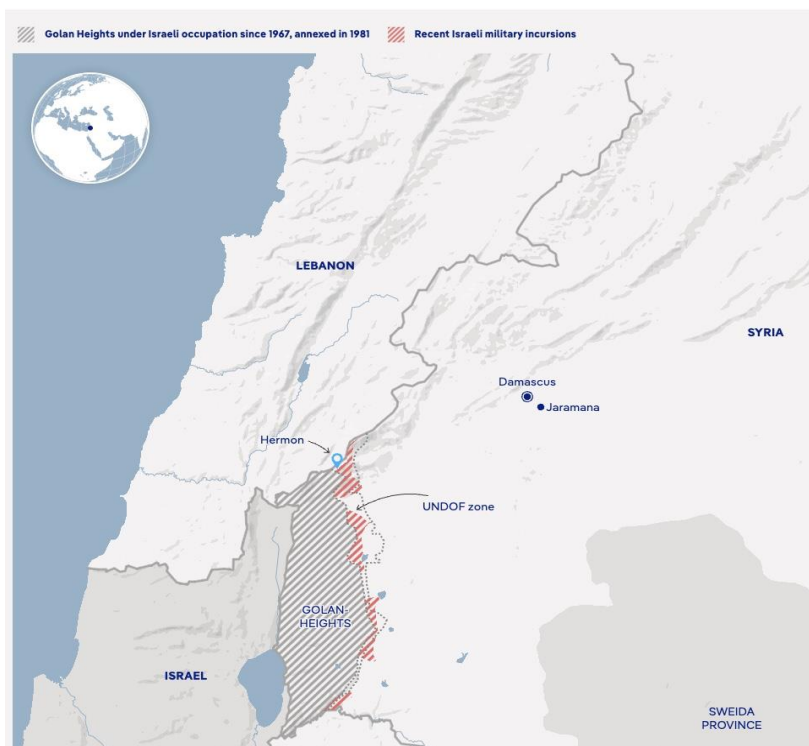
Israel's position in the Syrian situation is on the opposite side of Iran's; This is because the top Israeli priority in Syria and generally in the Middle East has been to counter and deter the

⁴⁵ Hamidreza Azizi, Julien Barnes-Dacey. 2024. "Beyond Proxies: Iran's Deeper Strategy in Syria and Lebanon." European Council on Foreign Relations. June 5, 2024. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/beyond-proxies-irans-deeper-strategy-in-syria-and-lebanon/>.

⁴⁶ Overton, Iain. 2024. "The Foreign Forces in Syria's Conflict: A Brief Explainer." Action on Armed Violence. December 6, 2024. <https://aoav.org.uk/2024/the-foreign-forces-in-syrias-conflict-a-brief-explainer/>.

Iranian threat and activity in the region. Israel has repeatedly expressed its security concerns about Iran's military presence and its proxy forces' activity, especially Hezbollah's.

Specifically with Syria, Israel has maintained over the years a hostile relationship. It is



currently occupying Syrian land, the infamous Golan Heights, a plateau that has remained under the direct Israeli control since the 1967 Six-Day War between Israel and Syria. The Golan Heights,⁴⁷ being a strategic region for both Israel and Syria, is considered by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) as a critical buffer zone for Israel's security interests. Adjacent to the occupied Golan Heights lies the Area of Separation (AOS). This UN-monitored buffer zone was established with the 1974

Disengagement Agreement between Israel and Syria, an area that needs to stay demilitarized. However, after the Assad fall, Israel has increased its military presence in the buffer zone, according to the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force⁴⁸ (UNDOF) that has the mandate to oversee the prevention of military engagement between the two sides.

Currently, as the new Syrian transitional government has been established within the Syrian political scene, Israel's strategy is shifted towards what is known as the "periphery doctrine".⁴⁹ According to this policy, Israel strives to find alliances in the non-Muslim populations of the Middle East and other countries around the region. For instance, and by solely observing Israel's presence in the UN Security Council, the government seems to be affiliated with the

⁴⁷ Al Jazeera Staff. 2024. "What Is the Golan Heights and Who Controls It?" ALJAZEERA. July 29, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/7/29/what-is-the-golan-heights-and-who-controls-it>.

⁴⁸ Schaer, Cathrin. 2025. "What Is Israel Doing in Syria, and Why?" Deutsche Welle. March 4, 2025. <https://www.dw.com/en/what-is-israel-doing-in-syria-and-why/a-71824463>.

⁴⁹ Ibid

Druze minority, a community that is majorly found in Syria, Lebanon, and Israel, and that adheres to the Druze faith, a monotheistic Abrahamic religion that differs from Muslims. Apart from that and facing intense uncertainty due to the change of the Syrian government and the establishment of a new regime with blurred intentions and policies, Israel has adopted a quite offensive strategy against Syria, reinforcing its military presence on the land. In contrast, its military activity during the Assad regime revolved solely around weakening Iran's and Hezbollah's influence.

Lebanon

Syria and Lebanon have a long history of tense and hostile relations shaped by clashes, civil conflicts, interventions, and occupation. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1922, both Syria and Lebanon, were placed under the French mandate⁵⁰ which carved out and created the separate political entity of Greater Lebanon, with Syria becoming a separate French mandate and viewing Lebanon as a region that belongs to the Syrian territory and that is closely interlinked to Syrians.

During the Lebanese civil war, Syria's intervention in 1976, even though guided by the political and military drive to impose control over Lebanon and to counter the Israeli influence on the south, which at the time was aiming at deterring PLO's presence there, was under the guise of stabilization efforts in Lebanon. Syria remained present on the land, without, however, officially annexing Lebanese territories, up to 2005, controlling Lebanon politically, economically, militarily, and intelligence-wise. The intense Syrian interference in Lebanon's internal and external affairs caused the development of Lebanese resentment towards Syria, with thousands of Lebanese demanding "Syria out" which was finally actualized in April 2005.

However, the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon had as a key effect the exponential rise of Hezbollah, a close ally of Syria's Assad regime. Hezbollah, on its part, having the direct support of Iran, was one of the main forces that backed and protected Assad during the Syrian

⁵⁰ "The French Mandate." 2025. Encyclopedia Britannica. May 2, 2025. https://www.britannica.com/place/Syria/The-French-mandate?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

civil war, often accused of committing war crimes ⁵¹against civilian populations that opposed Assad. After Assad's fall, Lebanon became the recipient of a huge refugee wave that overburdened its already fragile infrastructure. The refugee crisis created internal collisions and incidents of violence, especially near the city of Tripoli, intensifying the already acute relations between the two countries.

Currently, the Lebanese and Syrian relations are typically friendly but truly much more complicated. The official stance of the Lebanese Government seems to be maintaining a neutral and dissociating attitude towards Syria's internal affairs, though this seems quite difficult, since Lebanon is split internally based on the factor of religion and political views, with each group supporting a different approach on the handling of its neighbor. Apart from that, illegal border crossings and smuggling networks⁵² are still active -even after the fall of Assad- between the Syrian and the Lebanese border, creating tensions between the new Syrian Government and other actors that are enabling the border crossings, including Hezbollah. Certainly, Syria's economic collapse is reinforcing the smuggling networks that usually exploit migrants.

6.3.2. Global Powers

The Syrian conflict quickly evolved into a proxy battleground involving multiple global powers with competing strategic interests. Among these, the United States, Russia, and China played especially important roles, each shaping the trajectory of the war in distinct ways. While the U.S. focused on counterterrorism and limiting Iranian influence, Russia intervened militarily to preserve the Assad regime and expand its regional clout. China, though more restrained, offered diplomatic cover and economic engagement aligned with its principles of non-intervention and long-term strategic positioning. Understanding each power's motives, actions, and outcomes is essential to grasping the broader geopolitical dimensions of the Syrian crisis.

⁵¹ Frayer, Lauren, ed. 2024. *Who's Been Funding the HTS Rebels Now in Control of Syria?* <https://www.npr.org/2024/12/19/nx-s1-5232809/syria-hts-funding>.

⁵² Duhaibi, Jana. arch 31 2025. "Smuggling Persists on Lebanon-SYria Boarder after Assad's Fall." The Syrian Observer. arch 31 2025. <https://syrianobserver.com/foreign-actors/smuggling-persists-on-lebanon-syria-border-after-assads-fall.html>

United States of America

The United States of America proved to be a pivotal external actor in the Civil War, especially from 2015 and onward. During the early stages of the war, Washington provided covert support to opposition rebels, for example through the CIA's "Timber Sycamore" training and arms program, in an effort to pressure Assad's regime.⁵³

However, extremist factions continued to gain ground and thus the US shifted its focus to fighting ISIS. In September 2014, the US launched an official intervention as part of the global anti-ISIS coalition, deploying forces and airpower in Syria. US troops partnered with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to roll back ISIS's territorial gains in northern and eastern Syria.⁵⁴ The military campaign succeeded in destroying the self-proclaimed caliphate of ISIS by 2019, including the killing of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi during a US special forces raid.⁵⁵

Apart from the fight against terrorism, US forces did target the Syrian regime on special occasions. Specifically, an American missile strike took place on Syria's Shayrat Airbase in April of 2017 as a retaliation for Assad's chemical weapons use.⁵⁶ Throughout the war, the US maintained a relatively small force in Syrian soil, that peaked around 2,000 troops. By late 2019, roughly 900 troops still remained in Syria, with most of them tasked on securing ISIS prison camps and oilfields alongside the SDF.⁵⁷ Notably, President Donald Trump at one point openly acknowledged the fact that the American presence in the area was still there "only for the oil", highlighting Washington's intent to deny ISIS and the Assad regime access

⁵³ Mazzetti, Mark, Adam Goldman, and Michael S. Schmidt. "Behind the Sudden Death of a \$1 Billion Secret C.I.A. War in Syria." *The New York Times*, August 2, 2017, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/world/middleeast/cia-syria-rebel-arm-train-trump.html>.

⁵⁴ guillermo. "Post-Assad Syria: Challenges, Opportunities, and the US Role in Shaping Its Future - Foreign Policy Research Institute." Accessed April 21, 2025. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/01/post-assad-syria-challenges-opportunities-and-the-us-role-in-shaping-its-future/>.

⁵⁵ POLITICO. "ISIS Leader Killed in Daring U.S. Raid in Syria, Trump Says," October 27, 2019. <https://www.politico.com/news/2019/10/27/islamic-statebaghdadi-dead-donald-trump-000300>.

⁵⁶ Ackerman, Spencer, Ed Pilkington, Ben Jacobs, and Julian Borger. "Syria Missile Strikes: US Launches First Direct Military Action against Assad." *The Guardian*, April 7, 2017, sec. World news. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/06/trump-syria-missiles-assad-chemical-weapons>.

⁵⁷ "Where Global Players in Syria Stand after Assad's Downfall - ABC News." Accessed April 19, 2025. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-12-16/global-countries-in-syria-assad-fall-us-turkey-russia-iran/104716020>.

to Syria's petroleum resources, contradicting officials that had stressed the counterterrorism mission against ISIS as the main reason for the continuation of US presence in the region.⁵⁸

Strategically, American involvement in Syria served multiple interests. First and foremost was the geopolitical goal of containing terrorist threats and preventing the possibility of Syria becoming a safe haven for extremist groups that could threaten US security.⁵⁹ The rise of ISIS was seen as a major threat, and defeating it became the top priority by 2014. At the same time, Washington viewed the Syrian civil war through the lens of great-power rivalry and regional balance: the Assad regime's alignment with Iran and Russia put it greatly at odds with US interests. In that context, a key US objective was the limitation of Iranian influence, as well as the cutting of the Iran-Hezbollah supply line that ran through Syria. At the same time, the US protected Israel's security by trying to prevent Iranian entrenchment in Syria. American officials constantly supported Israeli air strikes on Iranian weapon shipments in Syria as part of this effort. Another factor was definitely the countering of Russian influence in the region. Moscow's intervention explicitly aimed to thwart American objectives and boost Assad.⁶⁰

By keeping a military presence in Syria, the US preserved some level of leverage on the ground and denied both Russia and Assad complete control over resource-rich regions. This strategic positioning enabled Washington to counter Moscow's ambition to monopolize the post-war security landscape in the region. Furthermore, the US had managed to project its stance as supporting the Syrian people's aspirations and hopes for democracy and human rights, in contrast to the authoritarian model embodied by Assad. Ultimately, when the regime fell in 2024, US officials hailed it as the "vindication" of a long-standing bipartisan policy opposing his rule.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Borger, Julian. "Trump Contradicts Aides and Says Troops in Syria 'Only for Oil.'" *The Guardian*, November 13, 2019, sec. US news. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/nov/13/donald-trump-syria-oil-us-troops-isis-turkey>.

⁵⁹ "After Assad: Navigating Syria Policy (Part 1) | The Washington Institute." Accessed April 19, 2025. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/after-assad-navigating-syria-policy-part-1>.

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Ibid

Washington considered Assad's fall a strategic victory, believing it removed a major source of regional instability and dealt a blow to the influence of Moscow and Tehran.⁶² Looking forward, US policy turned towards managing the aftermath, and continuing counter-ISIS operations, supporting allies on the ground and cautiously engaging the new authorities to encourage a more inclusive and stable Syrian governance.⁶³ The US seems to aim towards using its economic and diplomatic clout, as well as the prospect of lifting sanctions or providing reconstruction aid, as leverage towards steering Syria toward a peaceful, pluralistic future.⁶⁴

Russia

Russia emerged as a patron of the Assad regime and arguably the most consequential foreign military actor in Syria after 2015. Historically, Syria had been a Soviet ally since the Cold War, and Russia maintained a small naval facility at Tartous for decades.⁶⁵ Moscow's involvement escalated exponentially in September 2015 when President Vladimir Putin intervened to rescue the Assad regime from the verge of collapse.⁶⁶ Through this move, Russia expanded the Tartous naval base and established the Khmeimim airbase in Latakia, giving it permanent military installations on the Eastern Mediterranean coast.⁶⁷

Throughout the conflict, Russia and its mercenary groups were involved in securing major energy sites, guarding Assad's assets, and occasionally clashing with US forces. By 2024, with Russian help, Assad had crushed mainly the rebellion in most of Syria.⁶⁸ When a sudden

⁶² Kabalan, Marwan. "Analysis: Al-Assad's Fall Is Iran and Russia's Loss, but Are There Winners?" Al Jazeera. Accessed April 21, 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/10/analysis-al-assads-downfall-has-upended-the-regional-balance-of-power>.

⁶³ ABC News. "The State of Play for Global Powers in Syria after Assad's Fall." December 15, 2024. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-12-16/global-countries-in-syria-assad-fall-us-turkey-russia-iran/104716020>.

⁶⁴ Foreign Policy Research Institute, op. cit.

⁶⁵ Al Jazeera, op. cit., 44

⁶⁶ Council on Foreign Relations, op. cit.

⁶⁷ ABC News, op. cit.

⁶⁸ Al Jazeera, op. cit. 44

rebel offensive in late 2024 led to Assad's downfall, Russia proved unable to rescue its ally again. Up until that point, Russia's military role was decisive in sustaining the Assad regime.⁶⁹

Moscow's fundamental geopolitical and strategic interest in Syria was to prevent the overthrow of Assad in order to preserve Russia's status as the only dependable ally in the Arab world.⁷⁰ The Kremlin viewed the Syrian civil war as part of a broader contest against U.S. "unipolar" hegemony.⁷¹

From 2011 through 2020, Russia vetoed well over a dozen Syria-related UNSC resolutions, often jointly with China, thereby preventing international punitive action against Damascus. Alongside the military campaign, Russia led a parallel diplomatic track to shape Syria's political future. In 2017, Moscow orchestrated the Astana talks (with Iran and Türkiye) as an alternative to the Western-backed Geneva process.⁷² Through the Astana framework and subsequent Sochi conference, Russia positioned itself as the chief deal-broker: negotiating local ceasefires, "de-escalation zones," and eventually a proposed constitutional committee. This diplomacy had the effect of sidelining American influence and ensuring that any settlement would be on terms favorable to Assad (and by extension Russia).⁷³

For example, despite supporting opposing sides, Moscow engaged closely with Türkiye, at one point even coordinating joint patrols and agreements in northern Syria. Russia also opened lines of communication with Syrian Kurdish forces and various opposition figures, trying to present itself as a power that could talk to all sides. Most importantly, Russia maintained a mechanism of deconfliction with Israel as well, permitting Israel to strike Iranian targets in Syria so long as Russian forces were not harmed, a reflection of Moscow's flexible, interests-driven approach. In the intelligence domain, Russia was deeply embedded in the Syrian security state. Russian advisors worked within Syrian military and intelligence units to make sure operations remained active. One primary Russian concern was the presence of foreign jihadist fighters from the Caucasus and Central Asia in Syria. Putin famously argued

⁶⁹ ABC News, op. cit.

⁷⁰ Al Jazeera, op. cit. 44

⁷¹ ibid

⁷² ibid

⁷³ BBC News. "Syria Peace Talks: Armed Groups Come in from the Cold." January 23, 2017, sec. World. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-38712444>.

it was better to “fight terrorists in Syria, so we don’t have to fight them at home,” encapsulating Russia’s counterterrorism rationale for intervention.⁷⁴

By the end of 2024, Russia’s role in Syria had achieved most of its objectives. Assad’s regime survived for over a decade, and Russia established itself as a kingmaker in the Levant. Yet, the fall of the regime in December 2024 was a severe setback for the Kremlin.⁷⁵ The collapse of Damascus meant that Russia had lost its principal Arab ally, and the narrative of Russian importance in the region took a blow.⁷⁶ Although Moscow initially hoped to retain its bases (Kremlin spokesmen noted the status of Khmeimim and Tartus would be discussed with Syria’s new rulers).⁷⁷ The fall of the Assad regime had an impact on Russia’s broader regional strategy; its ability to project influence into the Mediterranean and Africa from Syrian soil may be rendered impossible, should the new Syrian government prove less welcoming.⁷⁸

China

China’s role in the Syrian Civil War was more low-profile, but still noteworthy, mostly through diplomatic and economic support to the Assad regime. Unlike the US and Russia, China did not send troops or become directly involved in the fighting. However, it consistently aligned itself with Damascus on the international stage. Beijing’s most visible contribution was in the UN Security Council, where it used its veto power multiple times to shield Assad’s government from resolutions and criticisms. Over the course of the war, China vetoed draft UNSC resolutions on Syria at least eight times, blocking measures that ranged from sanctions on Assad’s officials to humanitarian access provisions.⁷⁹ This is a significant number, taking

⁷⁴ Radwan, Tarek. “Assessing Putin’s ‘Fight Them There Not Here’ Strategy in Syria.” *Atlantic Council* (blog), September 28, 2015. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/assessing-putin-s-fight-them-there-not-here-strategy-in-syria/>.

⁷⁵ Al Jazeera, op. cit. 44

⁷⁶ *ibid*

⁷⁷ ABC News, op. cit.

⁷⁸ *ibid*

⁷⁹ Shamim, Sarah. “Al-Assad’s Fall in Syria: What’s at Stake for China?” Al Jazeera. Accessed April 21, 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/11/al-assads-fall-in-syria-whats-at-stake-for-china>.

into consideration that those eight vetoes constituted about half of all vetoes China had ever cast since the UN's founding.⁸⁰

Along with Russia, China opposed any UN action that it perceived as infringing on Syrian sovereignty or paving the way for forced regime change. For example, in July 2020, Beijing joined Moscow in vetoing a resolution to extend UN humanitarian aid deliveries from Turkey into rebel-held northwest Syria, arguing that such aid should just pass through the Assad government. China framed its stance as respect for Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity, emphasizing the principle of non-interference.⁸¹ This mirrored China's broader foreign policy doctrine and its wariness of legitimizing international interventions, a concern rooted in China's own domestic sensitivities about foreign meddling.

In a symbolic show of support, China welcomed President Assad for a high-profile state visit in September 2023, his first to China in nearly two decades. President Xi Jinping received Assad in Hangzhou and announced a new "strategic partnership," signaling Beijing's intent to deepen ties with Syria. During this visit, China and Syria agreed to cooperate on projects under China's Belt and Road Initiative and China endorsed Assad's continued rule. This warm diplomacy underscored that Beijing considered Assad a legitimate ruler and an important partner.⁸²

Beijing's motives for supporting Assad were guided by ideological principles and pragmatic interests. Ideologically, China is a strong supporter of the Westphalian notion of state sovereignty and non-intervention. The Arab Spring made Beijing deeply uneasy, as Chinese leaders saw parallels that could threaten the Communist Party's rule in China.⁸³

With Assad's government now fallen in 2024, Beijing is recalibrating its economic strategy. The new Syrian leadership might be less closely aligned with China, but they will still need foreign investment, and China, with its vast capital, could seize opportunities if Western

⁸⁰ yashed. "What the Fall of the Assad Regime Really Means for China." *Atlantic Council* (blog), December 18, 2024. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/syria-assad-hts-china-future/>.

⁸¹ Al Jazeera, op. cit. 61

⁸² Cash, Joe, and Joe Cash. "Syria's Assad in China, Seeks Exit from Diplomatic Isolation." *Reuters*, September 21, 2023, sec. World. <https://www.reuters.com/sports/syrias-assad-arrives-china-opening-event-asian-games-2023-09-21/>.

⁸³ "Curbing China's Influence on the New Syrian Government | The Washington Institute." Accessed April 21, 2025. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/curbing-chinas-influence-new-syrian-government>.

nations remain hesitant. It's telling that within weeks of Assad's ouster, China opened communications with Syria's interim authorities. Beijing's official reportedly met the rebel-led interim president, signaling China's interest in maintaining a foothold regardless of who is in power.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ *ibid*

7. Conclusion

To conclude, the situation in Syria appears to be one of the most convoluted crises in modern history. This complexity stems from an array of elements, such as a confluence of historical, political, sectarian, and geopolitical factors that have evolved over decades and that make Syria a land of contention.

After 14 years of a deadly civil war, sectarian divisions, massacres, attacks, internal clashes, occupations, displacements, foreign interventions and intense turmoil, Syria's new future emerged in December 2024, after the overturn of its authoritarian ruler, Assad and the subsequent formation of a new government with a questionable past and unknown future intentions. International interference and the constant battle for influence render Syria a proxy-war battleground, further dividing and agonizing the land. Sectarian tensions are still present with the various ethnic, religious, and military groups trying to find their place in a diverse but not yet inclusive environment. These dynamics, coupled with economic hardships and humanitarian crises, contribute to Syria's ongoing instability and the complexity of its path toward peace and reconstruction.

Looking ahead, Syria faces the even more daunting task of rebuilding its land, infrastructure, economy, political system, social fabric, and its future. The new interim government's aspirations seem to be the dismantling of any Assad-era remnants and the opening of Syria to Western influence and Western assistance. However, despite the closure of the Assad-era and the new government's effort to start again with a clean slate, the past of the Syrian land has left its stigma and bedevils the nation through various facets such as the still remaining sectarian tensions, the interests of different international actors and the -present to this day- foreign interventions. The success of Syria's transition will depend on sustained international cooperation, reduction of the foreign factor and involvement, and the achievement of an inclusive political transition that respects the rights of all communities.

8. Points to be addressed

1. What are the current internal dynamics within Syria after the fall of the Assad regime, and how can they be balanced?
2. What is the new interim government's stance on promoting an inclusive political process, and in what ways can this be improved achieved?
3. How are foreign interferences in Syria shaping the nation's trajectory, and are they benefiting or hindering the country revitalization?
4. What is the current situation regarding the relationship between Syria's interim authorities, Turkey, and the Syrian Democratic Forces, and how is Turkey managing the Kurdish presence in northern Syria?
5. What measures are necessary to integrate various armed factions into a unified national military structure and prevent further fragmentation?
6. Which factors are pushing for the Israeli military presence in Syria, and what is the current situation in the Golan Heights?
7. How has Hezbollah's engagement in Syria affected its domestic standing in Lebanon, both politically and socially?
8. What strategies can be used to prevent the resurgence of extremist groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda, considering the connection between the interim Syrian government and the latter?
9. How can regional and international stakeholders work together to support Syria's reconstruction efforts while respecting its sovereignty?

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