

THE CONFLICT IN SYRIA

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This civil war in Syria began in 2011, when anti-presidential protests evoked a violent response from the Syrian government. The conflict resulted in more than 500,000 deaths and over 5.7 million registered Syrians fleeing the country. This paper investigates the political, economic, and social causes of the war as well as the actions of four main sides of the conflict. The aim of this essay is to assess whether the lines between combat and politics in the Syrian civil war are blurred enough for the conflict to be considered a fourth-generation warfare.

History of the Conflict

Since 1963, Syria has remained under monolithic Ba'ath Party rule. It imposed the emergency law that was restricting freedoms of speech, as well as banning public gatherings of more than five participants¹. In 1971, after a coup in the country, Hafez al-Assad undertook the role of a Ba'ath Party President and began enforcing unpopular legislative provisions². For instance, he implemented a new Constitution that no longer required the President to be Muslim, which led to anti-government demonstrations and armed revolts among the Muslim Brotherhood. Hafez al-Assad removed all political rivals and appointed close family members to positions of power. In 2000, Bashar al-Assad virtually inherited the position of the President, as he had no political rivals at the time of the election³. Under the regime of the al-Assad family, Syria, that was supposed to be a semi-presidential unitary republic, adopted authoritarian regime with an autocratic ruler. The restrictions of freedom of speech, association, and assembly were the main reasons of the uprising in Syria.

¹ Khaled Y Oweis, "Syria's Assad Vows to Lift Emergency Law by Next Week," *Reuters*, April 16, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria/syrias-assad-vows-to-lift-emergency-law-by-next-week-idUSTRE72N2MC20110416>.

² Amelia Smith, "Profile: Hafez Al-Assad (12 March 1971 – 10 June 2000)," *Memo Middle East Monitor*, June 10, 2015, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20150610-memo-profile-hafez-al-assad-12-march-1971-10-june-2000/>.

³ Ameber Pariona, "What Type Of Government Does Syria Have?" *WorldAtlas*, last edited April 1, 2019, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-type-of-government-does-syria-have.html>.

The Conflict in Syria started in March 2011, following the anti-government protests in Daraa, which began after the torture of teenagers who got arrested for painting anti-presidential graffiti⁴. In response, the government's forces used lethal force against protestors, which led to more outrage from the public. The demonstrations soon spread across the country. In May 2011, the Army moved into cities of Homs, Daraa and Damascus⁵. On July 31, 2011, the Army entered Hama and Deir Ezzor to control the demonstrations. In a span of a few days, more than 200 civilians were killed as a result of military involvement⁶. By August 2011, the European Union and the United States had imposed economic sanctions on Syria⁷. Simultaneously, armed opposition groups such as "Free Syrian Army," comprised of military defectors, started to form inside the country. By the end of 2011, armed resistance frequently attacked several army checkpoints⁸. In July 2012, the conflict in Syria was classified as a civil war by the International Committee of the Red Cross⁹. In April of 2013, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (also known as ISIS) was formed¹⁰. It began seizing territories in Syria while making coordinated terrorist attacks across Europe.

List of Combatants

The protests in Syria escalated into a complex civil war among the four main combatants, as well as foreign states who were also involved in the conflict. The major warring factions in the conflict are the Syrian Army Forces (also known as the Pro-Assad

⁴ Rosa Furneaux, "A Timeline of the Syria Conflict," *Mother Jones*, June, 2019, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2019/06/timeline-syria-conflict-civil-war>.

⁵ Rosa Furneaux, "A Timeline of the Syria Conflict."

⁶ Furneaux.

⁷ Furneaux.

⁸ Furneaux.

⁹ International Committee of the Red Cross, "Syria: ICRC and Syrian Arab Red Crescent Maintain Aid Effort Amid Increased Fighting," July 17, 2012, <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/update/2012/syria-update-2012-07-17.htm>.

¹⁰ Rosa Furneaux, "A Timeline of the Syria Conflict," *Mother Jones*, June, 2019, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2019/06/timeline-syria-conflict-civil-war>.

Forces), the Kurdish Forces, Syrian opposition forces, and Islamic Opposition, which includes the ISIS. In September 2015, the Russian Federation joined the war to provide military assistance to Assad¹¹. They mostly carry out airstrikes against ISIS bases; however, activists claim that such strikes often kill other Syrian opposition forces and civilians¹². The United States supported Syrian rebels since 2011, yet in December 2018, President of the United States initiated the withdrawal of the forces from Syria¹³. Turkey has a significant role in the conflict and supports the Syrian rebels as a part of the United States-led coalition against Islamic State. Such countries as Iran, that supports the Assad regime, and Israel, that lends humanitarian aid to Syrians and frequently attacks Iranian forces, also participate in the conflict.

The Pro-Assad Forces consist of the Syrian Army, the Hezbollah militant group, and Shia Militias. These forces combined have over 100,000 fighters in Syria¹⁴. The Syrian government has a vast number of small arms and heavy weapons, such as grenade launchers, mines, and anti-tank weapons. The Syrian opposition forces consist of the Free Syrian Army, Syrian Democratic Forces and the Southern Front – decentralized groups that fight the al-Assad regime directly. The total number of fighters of the Free Syrian Army and the Southern Front groups comprise around 60,000 fighters, while the Syrian Democratic Forces has around 45,000 fighters¹⁵. The Democratic Union Party or The Kurdish Forces is an organization that is controlled by Kurds in northern Syria; it consists of approximately 20,000

¹¹ “Why is there a War in Syria?” *BBC News*, February 25, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35806229>.

¹² “Why is there a War in Syria?”

¹³ Carla E. Humud, Blanchard M. Christopher, and Nikitin D. Mary Beth, “Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response,” *Library of Congress. Congressional Research Service*, January 2, 2019, <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=819759>.

¹⁴ Illinois University Library, “The Syrian Conflict - MES: Pro-Assad Forces,” last edited April 17, 2019, <http://guides.library.illinois.edu/Syria/Pro-Assad>.

¹⁵ Illinois University Library, “The Syrian Conflict - MES: Pro-Assad Forces.”

fighters¹⁶. Although the U.S. government considered providing Syrian Kurds with heavy weaponry, the Kurdish Forces mostly possess only small arms and light weapons. The goal of the Democratic Union Party is to provide territorial autonomy to northern Syria. However, Syrian Kurds are not part of the anti-Assad opposition and are mostly fighting with ISIS, while opting for an informal non-aggression pact. The Islamic Opposition includes forces of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, ISIS, Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam. These groups are considered terrorist organizations by most countries, including Syria. What makes ISIS unique is that even though they are fighting the Assad Forces, other sides of the conflict, including foreign Alliances and even other terrorist organizations, consider them an enemy. It also became one of the biggest terrorist organizations in world history. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze ISIS in this paper.

At the beginning of the war, ISIS had the least number of fighters, compared to other sides of the conflict¹⁷. However, during the war, ISIS quickly expanded and increased its territories – by 2016, it had more than 30,000 active members¹⁸. The ISIS fighters utilize a variety of small arms, including Russian, U.S., and Chinese weapons. During the war, these organizations started utilizing heavy weapons such as mortars, rockets, and grenade launchers, as well as tanks. Members of The Islamic Opposition obtained some weapons and technology by capturing the ammunition of anti-government militias, which is supplied by the United States and Saudi Arabia¹⁹. They also manufactured their own ammunition and weapons, including suicide bombs.

Strategies Used by ISIS

¹⁶ Illinois University Library.

¹⁷ Illinois University Library.

¹⁸ Illinois University Library.

¹⁹ Brian Castner, “Exclusive: Tracing ISIS’ Weapons Supply Chain — Back to the US,” *Wired*, December 12, 2017, <https://www.wired.com/story/terror-industrial-complex-isis-munitions-supply-chain>.

ISIS is a fundamentalist movement of Salafi jihadism, whose goal is to establish an Islamic caliphate in Syria and Iraq. It has been carrying out military offensives from 2013 to 2017 to seize territory in the country. It was a versatile force that was a terrorist group, as well as partly light infantry and bureaucratic state²⁰. The ISIS used conventional war strategy as well as suicide bombings in Syria and worldwide, to incite panic and fear among the population. Due to its media presence, ISIS was able to recruit thousands of fighters from more than 80 countries. By August 2014, through a series of fights, ISIS conquered significant oil fields in Ain Zalah, Mosul Dam, and Batma²¹. It provided the organization with additional funding, while Turkey and the Free Syrian Army had to buy oil from them. By September 2014, ISIS controlled more than 100,000 square kilometers with around 11 million inhabitants, while the profits from oil provided the organization with over \$1 million daily²². With the aid of the United States, Russia, and combined support of other sides of the conflict, as well as thousands of airstrikes, ISIS lost all its territories by March 2019²³. The remains of ISIS are now oriented on guerrilla tactics and suicide bombings.

Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures of ISIS

Apart from conventional warfare, some of the TTP used by ISIS consists of suicide vehicle-borne explosive devises, fields of IEDs, and chemical attacks against armed forces and civilians. Predominantly, ISIS utilized large numbers of small IEDs, which remains their most effective strategy. The terrorists employed radios or cell phones to detonate IEDs remotely, until the coalition developed new methods of jamming and started employing mine

²⁰ CISAC, "The Islamic State," last edited September, 2019, https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/islamic-state#highlight_text_12400.

²¹ Ellen, Ioanes, "Here's What's Left of ISIS — and Why They Still Pose a Major Threat," *Business Insider*, August 27, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.my/trump-said-isis-was-finished-threat-2019-8/>.

²² Ellen, Ioanes, "Here's What's Left of ISIS — and Why They Still Pose a Major Threat."

²³ Ioanes.

rollers to detonate these devices. In response, ISIS started to offset charges and delay detonations to ensure that IEDs would still damage enemy vehicles²⁴. The organization also equipped its fighters with suicide vests, which was a troubling tactic for unprepared forces.

Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency Methods of the Syrian Government

To secure the rule of the al-Assad, Syria implemented counterterrorism and counterinsurgency methods. The political system of the country did not change, and no new laws that improved the freedom of speech were implemented. The number of fighters in the Syrian Army has also decreased from 220,000 in 2011 to around 90,000 in 2016²⁵. Instead, Assad got the extensive support of foreign alliances, such as Russia and Iran. Syria also used the Islamic Opposition strategically to initiate a war at the rebel front, ensuring that the Anti-Assad Forces and The Kurdish Forces are at war with ISIS and other terrorist organizations.

Assessment

Syrian civil war is a complicated conflict, which involves a multitude of combatants and foreign bodies that support different sides. The Syrian conflict may be considered a fourth-generation warfare, as it erases the line between war and politics, as well as between civilians and fighters. The war that has started as a peaceful anti-government protest became a rebellion against the al-Assad regime. It has led to the emergence of the insurgent forces, as well as to the development of the biggest and deadliest terrorist organization in history, which had its own territory and financial system, as well as millions of citizens living on territories it had occupied.

²⁴ Matthew F. Cancian, "Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures of the Islamic State," *Military Review*, April, 2017, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/March-April-2017/ART-009/>.

²⁵ Illinois University Library, "The Syrian Conflict - MES: Pro-Assad Forces," last edited April 17, 2019, <http://guides.library.illinois.edu/Syria/Pro-Assad>.

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