

## Syrian Civil War [UPSC International Relations Notes]

The West Asian country of Syria has been embroiled in a tumultuous civil war since 2011. The war has displaced millions and thrown the country into political chaos. In this article, you can read all about the civil war in Syria, its players, causes and ramifications for the world. This is an important part of the international relations segment in the [UPSC syllabus](#).

### Syria - Introduction

Syria is a West Asian country having Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Israel as its bordering countries. It also has a coastline with the Mediterranean Sea on its west.

- Syria is also home to diverse ethnic groups and religious denominations such as the Syrian Arabs, Turkmen, Kurds, Assyrians, Circassians, Armenians, Greeks and Mandaeans, with Arabs being the largest ethnic group.
- Syria's religious groups include Sunnis, Alawis, Shiites, Christians, Jews, Mandaeans, Druze, Salafis, Ismailis and Yazidis. The largest religious group is Sunni Muslim.
- Syria historically refers to a region encompassing the Levantine regions of the ancient world. The modern state of Syria includes regions of many ancient kingdoms and civilisations.
- Its capital city of Damascus and another city Aleppo feature in the list of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities.
- In Arabic, Syria is also known as 'Al Sham'.
- Syria emerged as a parliamentary republic in 1945 when the Republic became a founding member of the United Nations.
- This ended the French mandate, prior to which the region was under centuries of Ottoman rule.
- In 1963, there was a Ba'athist coup d'état after which the Ba'ath Party has maintained its power.
- From 1963 to 2011, the country was in a state of Emergency, which meant that citizens did not have constitutional protections.

### Government in Syria at Present

- Syria is a unitary republic.
- It is the sole country to espouse Ba'athism politically.
  - Ba'athism is based on the principles of Arab nationalism, pan-Arabism, and Arab socialism, as well as social progress. It is by and large a secular ideology.
- Since 1963, the Ba'ath Party has been in power in Syria.
- The current President of Syria is Bashar al-Assad, who has been in power since 2000.
- He succeeded his father Hafez al-Assad, who was the President from 1971 to 2000.
- The government in Syria has been criticised as a kind of personalist dictatorship.
- The Ba'athist regime has been accused of being oppressive particularly against political opponents and free press.

### Arab Spring

In 2011, the Arab Spring started in Tunisia and spread to many nations in the Arab world including Syria. These were a series of pro-democracy uprisings, both peaceful and armed. Many of them were crushed with a heavy hand by the government.

- In Syria, the government retaliated against the protestors, and this brought to fore the deep sectarian divide in the Syrian society and polity. Protestors were brutally crushed in the country.

- The civil war which started in 2011 is still on-going and has had a severe impact on the people of Syria. It has seen millions of people displaced and killed as a result of the violence.
- Syria has become a centre of several proxy wars being fought among several regional factions and also international players supporting these factions.
- The Global Peace Index has ranked Syria the lowest from 2016 to 2018. In 2019, it improved by one rank to reach the second last place.
- The civil war has also seen the participation of the terrorist organisation, [ISIS](#), which had several parts of the country under its control, although now, it does not command any real authority or any territory under its control.

### Different Factions in the Syrian Civil War

There are many factions fighting this war, for various interests. For ease of understanding, the factions may be represented as pro or anti Assad, the ruling President of the country. The following table illustrates the various factions in the Syrian civil war.

Pro-Government (Assad supporters)	Anti-Government (detractors of Assad) also called Syrian Rebels
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Syrian militia:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Syrian Armed Forces (SDA) (government's armed forces)</li> <li>2. National Defence Force (NDF)</li> <li>3. Shabiha, an unofficial militia drawn mainly from the country's Alawite minority group (Assad belongs to the Alawite group)</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. Iran: Iran, a Shia country, sees Assad, a Shia, as its closest ally in the Arab world.</li> <li>3. Egypt</li> <li>4. Hezbollah: Lebanese Shia Islamist political, military and social organisation</li> <li>5. Russia: Russia has carried out air strikes against the protestors, and supports the Syrian government in the UN. Syria has Russia's only Mediterranean naval base and an airbase, apart from other military interests.</li> <li>6. Foreign Shia militias recruited by Iran from Yemen, Afghanistan and Iraq.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Syrian National Coalition (SNC): A coalition of anti-government factions, based in Turkey aiming to set up a civil and democratic state in Syria. It is recognised as the legitimate government of Syria by several Gulf States.</li> <li>2. Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF): Predominantly by Kurdish People's Protection Units (<a href="#">YPG</a>), SDF is an alliance of chiefly Kurdish, but also Arab, Turkmen and Syriac-Assyrian militias. It has directed most of its fighting against ISIS and the Al Nusra Front (a jihadist group aiming to create an Islamic Emirate under Sharia law).</li> <li>3. Free Syrian Army (FSA): Backed by Saudi Arabia, FSA was formed in 2011 by a defecting group of SDA officers.</li> <li>4. Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) with its military arm, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. SSG is not recognised by the SNC.</li> <li>5. Turkey: Supports Syrian Rebels but is against the YPG. Also against US support to YPG.</li> <li>6. Gulf Arab states: Sunni powers like Saudi Arabia lend support to the rebels.</li> <li>7. USA: Gives weapons, training and military assistance to the rebels. The US exited from Syria after ISIS was ousted since that was the purported aim of America.</li> </ol>
<p>Other players included ISIS and the Al Nusra Front. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was opposed by both government and rebel groups, in order to recapture the areas ISIS had captured.</p>	

### Who are the Kurds?

The Kurds are said to be the largest stateless ethnic group.

- They are chiefly Sunni Muslim with a minority of Yazidis, Christians, Shias, etc.
- The Kurds are native to the mountainous region known as Kurdistan in West Asia, spanning southeast Turkey, northern Iraq, northwestern Iran and northern Syria.
- Although the Kurds were promised a separate country in the Treaty of Sevres (1920), the Treaty of Lausanne three years later nullified this promise, and they were left as minorities in all the countries that were carved out.
- The Kurds have been fighting for a separate homeland, and also for more rights in their respective countries.
- In 2014, the Kurds in northern Syria, in the region of Rojava, declared the areas under their control as an autonomous government.
- The Syrian Democratic Council was formed in order to further the cause of the Kurds in Syria. It is the political arm of the SDF.

## Humanitarian Crisis in Syria

The war has forced millions of people to flee Syria and become refugees in other countries. It is estimated that 40% of the children there miss school because of the conflict. While peace has been restored in many areas, there are people struggling to live elsewhere.

The war had triggered a massive refugee crisis in Europe. Many have fled to neighbouring countries into refugee camps in Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and Turkey.

The refugees made headline stories when they braved several odds in their journey across the sea to a better life in Europe.

While many European nations have refused to take up the refugees into their countries, Germany has said it will take up to 500,000 people a year from the conflict-ridden place. The UK has promised to take up to 20,000 people from Syrian refugee camps by 2020.

There have been many peace processes that tried to negotiate between the conflicting parties.

A Syrian Constitutional Committee was formed in late 2019 to discuss a settlement and to draft a new constitution for Syria. However, the Assad government has been critical of this Committee.

## India and the Syrian Civil War

India has traditionally supported the Assad regime. The relations between India and Syria have been cordial. The support for the Assad regime is largely seen as a reciprocation for Syria's continued stance that the Kashmir issue is a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan. Also, in keeping with India's commitment to non-interventionism, a position shared by members of the [BRICS](#), India did not respond to calls for a military intervention in Syria. Additionally, India fears the rise of Islamists in the possible scenario where the Assad regime is toppled, leading to instability in the region.