FACT SHEET
WHO’S WHO IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

Background  |  Introduction  |  The Regime  |  Regime Affiliated Armed Groups  |  The Rebels  |  Rebel Affiliated Armed Groups  |  Independents  |  Other Resources

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BACKGROUND

The war in Syria, which has been raging for more than three years, is much more than a local, national issue. Millions of Syrian refugees have flooded into neighboring Jordan to the south, into Lebanon to the west and into Turkey to the north. In addition, sectarian violence between Sunni and Shiite Muslim communities has spilled over into Lebanon, the conflict is exacerbating the cycle of violence in Iraq and there have also been sporadic incidents of mortar and artillery fire landing in Israel.

TOTAL CASUALTIES (MINIMUM ESTIMATES)

- Estimates range from 100,000 to 150,000 people have been killed (March 2014)
- 9 million have been displaced

Human rights abuses that have been confirmed include but are not limited to:

- Chemical Weapons attacks on civilian areas
- Barrel bombing civilian areas
- Widespread use of rape as a weapon of war
- Summary executions of prisoners, including children
- Mutilation and display of corpses, including crucifixion
- Torture, including of children

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1 http://www.aawsat.net/2014/03/article55330324
4 http://syrianrefugees.eu/
6 http://edition.cnn.com/2014/04/30/world/meast/syria-civil-war/
7 http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/04/syria-has-a-massive-rape-crisis/274583/
9 http://edition.cnn.com/2014/05/01/world/meast/syria-bodies-crucifixions/
10 http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/05/syria-children-maim-torture-assad-forces-un
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INTRODUCTION

Because of the extremely fluid situation on the ground, as well as the dangerous conditions for journalists that exist, accurate up-to-date information is difficult to obtain. Over three years of fighting and horrific human rights abuses\(^1\) have led to an increasingly sectarian\(^2\) patchwork of groups, beset by shifting alliances and power struggles.

This is a brief guide to the major factions currently involved in the Syrian war. Only the most prominent are presented for the sake of simplicity.

THE REGIME

Who: Forces fighting for President Bashar al-Assad. His core supporters are from the Alawite minority to which he belongs.

Ideology: Baathist, Secularist, Arab Nationalist

Supporting States: Russia, Iran

Goals: Preserving Assad’s regime

President Bashar al-Assad inherited Syria from his father, Hafez al-Assad in 2000. Resentment at his autocratic rule boiled over during the Arab Spring protest of 2011. After he refused to heed calls to step down, protestors and deserters from his army began an open insurrection, beginning the war. He has remained steadfast in his position that he is the legitimate President of Syria and that his enemies are terrorists.

\(^1\) [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/19/world/middleeast/both-sides-in-syria-are-targeting-civilians-un-report-says.html?_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/19/world/middleeast/both-sides-in-syria-are-targeting-civilians-un-report-says.html?_r=1)

REGIME AFFILIATED ARMED GROUPS

SYRIAN ARMED FORCES

Commander: Fahd Jassem al-Freij
What: The National Armed forces of the state of Syria
Goal: Preserving Assad regime
Side: Regime
Component Groups: Infantry, Artillery, Tanks, Air Force
Estimated Strength: 220-280,000, Artillery,
Air Power (Russian MiGs)

Strengths / Tactics: Dropping\(^{13}\) barrel-bombs\(^{14}\) on civilian areas\(^{15}\)

Those of the Syrian armed forces that have remained loyal to Assad. At the start of the war their strength was estimated at 178,000 with 314,000 reservists. Estimates are harder to measure now, but their strength is estimated as being between 220-280,000 men. The main advantage of the Syrian Armed Forces is their complete domination of the air. It has been sharply criticized for perpetrating human rights abuses. The Syrian Air force is mostly made up of Russian supplied MiGs.

AL-QUDS FORCE AND BASIJ MILITIA (IRAN)

Commander: Qasem Soleimani\(^{16}\)
What: Iranian Revolutionary Guard's\(^{17}\) Special Forces and Paramilitary Support Units\(^{18}\)
Goal: Iranian regional hegemony
Side: Regime
Ideology: Shi’ite Islamist, Iranian Nationalist
Component Groups: Al-Quds Force, Basij Militias
Estimated Strength: Quds Force 15,000 total, Basij militias unknown

Strengths / Tactics: Elite infantry force, superior training and military intel

\(^{13}\) http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/02/us-syria-crisis-fighting-idUSBREA110BU20140202
\(^{14}\) http://www.newsweek.com/are-syrian-barrel-bombs-really-worse-normal-weaponry-228913
\(^{16}\) http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/09/30/130930fa_fact_filkins?currentPage=all
\(^{17}\) http://www.cfr.org/iran/iran-revolutionary-guard/p14324
\(^{18}\) http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/basij-resistance-force
The Al-Quds force is the elite unit of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, set up after 1979 to safeguard the Islamic Republic. It has been sent to secure Iranian interests in propping up Assad. Aside from battlefield support, Iran also supplies weapons, intelligence, training and strategic advice. They do not merely serve as soldiers, but have input on a higher strategic level, although it is not known to what extent.

Little is known about the secretive force, but its strength is estimated at around 15,000 men in total. How many are in Syria is unknown. They are supported by the Basij, fiercely loyal paramilitaries that serve under the Revolutionary Guard.

**NATIONAL DEFENSE FORCES (NDF) & ALLIED PARAMILITARY GROUPS**

**Commanders:** NDF unknown, Others: Mihrac Ural

**What:** Militia groups supporting Assad's regime. NDF is the best known and largest.  

**Goal:** Maintaining Assad's regime

**Side:** Regime

**Ideology:** Shiites, Alawites, Baathists, Sunnis, Communists, Christians

**Component Groups:** NDF, Ba'ath Brigades (BB), TSR, Others

**Estimated Strength:** 100,000 for the NDF, BB 10,000

**Strengths / Tactics:** Brutal, guerrilla tactics

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22 [http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54167](http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54167)

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Militia units that support Assad have been organized and combined into the National Defense Force. These militias provide infantry to support the army. Due to fears over the loyalty of the army and the risk of defections, Assad typically sends regular units into battle alongside loyal militias such as Suqur al-Sahara (The Desert Falcons). An assortment of other militias and paramilitary organizations are used as auxiliaries in the field. Pro-Assad militias come from a variety of sects and political strands. The Baath Brigades, the military wing of the ruling Baath Party form part of Assad’s core power base.

HEZBOLLAH

Commander: Hassan Nasrallah
What: Lebanese Shi’ite terrorist group formed to fight Israel
Goal: Supporting Iran/Assad strategic alliance
Side: Regime, Iran
Ideology: Shiite Islamism
Component Groups: None

Estimated Strength: 20,000-30,000 (25% full-time active)
Strengths / Tactics: Well-trained, disciplined fighting force which turned the tide for the Regime at Qusayr and Yabroud battles

24 http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/desert-falcons-elite-pro-assad-force/
26 http://csis.org/publication/assessing-consequences-hezbollahs-necessary-war-choice-syria
27 http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/syria-update-fall-al-qusayr
28 http://syriadirect.org/main/36-interviews/1284-activist-80-of-rebel-fighters-have-left-qalamoun
Originally founded to fight Israel in southern Lebanon, the Shiite militia force\(^{29}\) joined the conflict in 2013. Its name translates to "Party of God." Assad has long been a backer of Hezbollah and allows Iran to ship weapons\(^{30}\) to the terrorist group through Syria. Hezbollah forces provided much needed reinforcements which have been instrumental\(^{31}\) in recent regime gains, in particular in recapturing the strategically important town of Qusayr in 2013, and recently Yabroud. It is widely regarded as being more powerful\(^{32}\) than the Lebanese army. There are fears that Hezbollah's involvement will drag heavily-divided Lebanon into the war. The US State Department has classified the group as a foreign terrorist organization.

### THE REBELS

**Who:** Forces fighting against President Bashar al-Assad's regime. A combination of Sunni Islamists, secularist forces as well as Kurdish and other militias.

**Supporting States:** Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, (to a lesser extent the USA and some European countries)

**Goals:** Removing Assad from power, many groups aim for the creation of an Islamic state, Kurds aim for autonomy

There are a myriad of different factions fighting Assad. Protests against his rule spread across the country in 2011 and were met with heavy repression. At the beginning of the war, most of them were, at least officially, secularist and democratic in outlook. As the war has progressed the rebels have become increasingly Islamist.

\(^{29}\) [http://www.idfblog.com/hezbollah/](http://www.idfblog.com/hezbollah/)


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REBEL AFFILIATED ARMED GROUPS

ISLAMIC FRONT

**Commander:** Ahmed Issa al-Sheik (from Suqour al-Sham)

**What:** A coalition of Islamist brigades

**Goal:** The removal of Assad and later creation of an Islamic State, Jihad

**Side:** Rebels, Islamists. Cooperates with Jabhat Al-Nusra

**Ideology:** Sunni Islamism

**Component Groups:** Ahrar as-Sham, Suquor al-Sham Brigades, The Tawhid Brigade, The Haq Brigade, The Ansar al-Sham Battalions, The Islam Army

**Estimated Strength:** 40,000 to 70,000 (March 5th)

**Strengths / Tactics:** Syria's most powerful insurgent bloc, slightly more moderate Salafi Islamism than Nusra or ISIS

"Syria’s most powerful insurgent bloc" was formed as a merger between various Islamist factions that share the goal of establishing an Islamic State. It is a coalition of Islamist brigades that has a semi-unified command. Tensions have existed between the Islamic Front and ISIS Groups were rankled by ISIS's brutal application of Islamist principles and extreme violence. In particular, a series of high profile murders, especially the murder of a commander from Ahrar as-Sham and seizures of weapons depots by ISIS fighters provoked fellow jihadis. The coalition fights variously against ISIS, Assad's force and factions of the Free Syria Army (FSA). On and off it has cooperated with FSA banner coalitions such as the Syrian Revolutionary Front (SRF). Frequently, however, battalions have refused to fight their fellow jihadis in ISIS, and have allowed FSA banner brigades such as those in the SRF to bear the brunt of the fighting.


34 [http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54183](http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54183)
JABHAT AL-NUSRA

Commander: Abu Mohammed al-Joulani
What: Al Qaeda's official affiliate in the Syrian conflict
Goal: Global Islamic caliphate, Jihad
Side: Rebels, Islamists.
Ideology: Sunni Islamism
Component Groups: None

Estimated Strength: 15,000-20,000
Strengths / Tactics: Suicide bombings

Al-Qaeda's official affiliate in the Syrian War, Nusra is one of the most effective and feared fighting forces in the war. They swear loyalty personally to al-Qaeda leader Sheik Zawahiri. They have (officially) prioritized defeating the regime over creating an Islamic state, leading to disagreements with ISIS, which does the opposite. It still maintains the long term Islamist goal of establishing in Islamic Caliphate in the Levant. Their fighters are a combination of guerilla fighters from Iraq with experience fighting American soldiers and local Jihadists.

Better funding and resources allowed Nusra to gain recruits at the expense of them cash-strapped Free Syria Army. ISIS and Nusra split in mid-2013 when Zawahiri called on ISIS to disband and they refused. They are allied with the Islamic Front and work together occasionally with FSA units such as the SRF.

37 http://www.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/493
THE ISLAMIC STATE (AKA: ISIS, ISIL, DAASH)

Commander: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi
What: Terrorist group establishing state, formed from Islamic State of Iraq
Goal: An Islamic state in parts of Iraq and Syria, Global Islamic caliphate
Side: Rebels, Islamists
Ideology: Sunni Islamism
Component Groups: None
Estimated Strength: Reliable estimate unavailable

Strengths / Tactics: Brutality, implementation of sharia

The most notorious of Syria's many factions, this Sunni Islamist group seeks to establish an independent state in western Syria and northern Iraq, and has declared itself as such. Formed out of al-Qaeda in Iraq, called the Islamic State of Iraq, they initially entered the Syrian Civil War to support the Islamist cause there. Extreme violence and brutality in enforcing Sharia law have been the hallmarks of its presence. For example, in one incident they displayed the crucified bodies of their enemies in Raqqa.

Its Emir, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, had a personal dispute with the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra and with al-Qaeda head Sheik Zawahiri which resulted in the group being expelled from al-Qaeda. ISIS then stopped providing Iraqi oil revenues to Nusra. It has also engaged in fighting with Kurdish militias, Nusra and other brigades flying FSA banners. ISIS is comprised mostly of foreigners and very few ethnic Syrians. It has been accused of betraying the revolution to further its own ends and of collaborating with the regime. They are propped up by a local 'ansar' network (helpers) that provides logistical and local support. See our ISIS factsheet.

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39 http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/17291
43 http://edition.cnn.com/2014/05/01/world/meast/syria-bodies-crucifixions/
FREE SYRIAN ARMY

**Commander:** Various, officially Abdul-Ilah al-Bashir. Syrian Revolutionary Front (SRF)- Jamal Ma’aruf

**What:** Umbrella of broadly secularist rebel forces formed mainly from Syrian army deserters

**Goal:** End of the Assad regime, democratic state

**Side:** Rebels

**Ideology:** Broadly secularist, some Islamist elements/sympathies

**Component Groups:** Supreme Military Council, Syrian Revolutionary Front (SRF), Euphrates Islamic Liberation Front, others

**Estimated Strength:** Reliable estimate unavailable

**Strengths / Tactics:** Western backed official opposition, comparatively poor funding (under National Coalition of Syria).

The oldest of the Syrian rebel factions, formed in the early days of the war primarily out of defectors from the Syrian army. They do not operate as a unified army rather they are a loose group of battalions and coalitions that fight under the broad banner of the FSA. They have suffered heavy losses both to regime forces and ISIS, whom they have been fighting but still remain a central component of the rebel forces. Their exact numbers are unknown. Fresh defections from the Syrian army have bolstered their ranks over the course of the war. Defections are estimated in the 'tens of thousands.'

Some FSA brigades swear loyalty to the Supreme Military Council. They have received limited aid from the west. In response to the merger of the Islamic Front, a loosely western aligned coalition called the Syrian Revolutionary Front formed under the FSA banner, commanded by Jamal Ma’aruf. The Euphrates Islamic Liberation Front is another FSA banner coalition. On occasion these groups have fought the Islamic Front and Jabhat al-Nusra and have joined both against ISIS and the regime.

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45 [http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=53910](http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=53910)

INDEPENDENTS

POPULAR PROTECTION UNITS (YPG) AND ALLIES

Commander: Sipan Hemo
What: Kurdish and allied militia groups in northeastern Syria, some Christian allies
Goal: Kurdish autonomy
Side: Against Islamists, aim for autonomy from Assad regime
Ideology: Kurdish Nationalist, Christian
Syriac Military Council (SMC)

Component Groups: YPG, Syriac Military Council
Estimated Strength: 40,000-50,000
Strengths / Tactics: Re-opening schools, driving out ISIS and Nusra

Kurdish militia groups such as YPG have been fighting to protect their areas in the north of the country from both the ravages of war. It was recently joined by the Syriac Military Council, a Christian militia group. Predominantly they have been focused on driving out ISIS, who enforced brutal Sharia when they were in control of cities, as well as kidnapping local leaders and vandalizing Sufi mosques. They have also fought Nusra and other groups from the Islamic Front. They aim at unifying and protecting Kurdistan and are affiliated with the Kurdish Democratic Union Party and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) that operates in Turkey. No calls have yet been seriously made for an independent Kurdish state.

OTHER RESOURCES

Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi
http://www.aymennjawad.org/

Dr. Joshua Landis
http://syriacomment.com/