



## SYRIA: BETWEEN CONFLICT & STABILITY

Picture: natanaelginting / www.freepik.com



### AUTHOR

Christopher Phillips  
Professor of  
International Relations,  
Queen Mary  
University of London

### CHACR

The Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research is the British Army's think tank and tasked with enhancing the conceptual component of its fighting power. The views expressed in this *In Depth Briefing* are those of the author, and not of the CHACR or the British Army. The aim of the briefing is to provide a neutral platform for external researchers and experts to offer their views on critical issues.

This document cannot be reproduced or used in part or whole without the permission of the CHACR.

[www.chacr.org.uk](http://www.chacr.org.uk)

**A**FTER more than a decade of conflict, Syria is experiencing relative calm. The primary cause of the civil war, rebels seeking to overthrow dictatorial President Bashar al-Assad, has been largely settled. Assad remains in power and the fractured rebel movement has been militarily defeated. Assad's victory is somewhat pyrrhic, however. While he recaptured the most populated parts of Syria, large areas remain out of his grasp. North-eastern Syria is held by Kurdish-dominated forces supported by the United States and its western allies, after liberating the area from Da'esh. Several pockets in the north, including Idlib, are controlled by the remnants of the rebels, with support from Turkey. Meanwhile to survive, Assad relied heavily on his own international allies, Iran and Russia, who now hold considerable sway over his government and retain a sizeable military and economic presence.

Syria today is de-facto partitioned with a heavy international presence. The largest area is controlled by Assad, supported by Russia and Iran; the north east is

held by the Kurdish-dominated forces, protected by the US and its allies; while several pockets in the north are held by rebel groups backed by Turkey. Low level fighting and skirmishes continue in the borderlands of these areas, but serious campaigning has not occurred since early 2020. For now, the various external sponsors are urging restraint on their Syria allies who, in turn, are focusing internally at consolidating their rule in their areas of control. However, this does not mean the war is over. With attempts at negotiation going nowhere and external players' relations with one another volatile, there remains the potential for the conflict to fire up once again. This paper gives a brief history of the conflict followed by an outline of the situation in each part of Syria, concluding with future challenges for the Syrian and external powers involved.

### A LONG WAR

Syria's civil war began as a peaceful protest movement but mutated into one of the most violent and disruptive conflicts of the twenty-first century. Protests began in 2011, inspired

by similar uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya that had toppled long-ruling dictators. Assad has ruled since 2000 when he succeeded his equally autocratic father, who had reigned for 30 years. The Assads' socialist regime theoretically offered support for Syria's urban and rural poor, but in recent decades reforms had cut back the social safety net. The regime also favoured the 10% of the population from the Assads' religious sect, the Alawis, a derivative of Shia Islam, frustrating some among the Sunni Muslim majority (75% of the population) who had historically led Syria. Persistent autocracy, economic troubles and sectarian tension bubbled below the surface for years but exploded in 2011.

Faced with repeated regime violence some in the opposition took up arms, transforming the unrest into civil war. These armed rebels received money and weapons from Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the west, and captured territory in 2012-3. However, Assad retained some domestic support from those that had benefitted from his rule or were scared of the rebels,

increasingly dominated by Sunni Islamists. Non-Sunni minorities like the Alawis, Christians and Druze stuck with Assad, as did secular Sunnis, who all feared an Islamist victory. Assad also called in his friends for help with Iran sending advisors and fighters to bolster his depleted military.

The rebels initially hoped for western intervention against Assad, expecting a no-fly zone like NATO launched in Libya. However, all such hopes were dashed in 2013 when US president Barack Obama declined to enforce a self-declared 'red line' after Assad was alleged to use chemical weapons. While Obama instead struck a deal with Russia to remove Assad's chemical weapon stockpile peacefully, the rebels realized that western governments were not going to help them. This vindicated and empowered the more radical Islamists who had always opposed western help.

One such group was Da'aesh, originally Al-Qaeda in Iraq. Da'aesh had crossed into Syria and taken advantage of the chaos to capture territory from less radical rebel groups. By 2014 they controlled a huge chunk of eastern Syria and western Iraq, declaring a new 'Caliphate'. This alarmed Obama enough to build an international military coalition against it. However, Obama feared committing US troops and so needed allies to fight Da'aesh on the ground. In Iraq he had the Iraqi army, but couldn't support Assad given his atrocities, and didn't trust the Islamists among the rebels. Instead, Obama supported Kurdish forces. Syria's Kurds, 10% of the population, had long been discriminated against by the Assads, but didn't trust the rebels, and so formed their own militias during the civil war to keep both out of the Kurdish-dominated north east. These groups were already fighting Da'aesh, which coveted Kurdish territory, and



“LIFE FOR ORDINARY SYRIANS IS MADE WORSE BY ASSAD AND HIS CRONIES SKIMMING OFF WHAT LITTLE MONEY DOES COME IN, ALL WHILE MAINTAINING THEIR OPPRESSIVE RULING APPARATUS.”

so were natural allies for the US to sponsor. After a gruelling campaign Da'esh was physically defeated by 2019, with Kurdish-dominated forces taking their place in north-eastern Syria.

Assad's war against the rebels meanwhile turned in his favour in 2015. The rebels and their external sponsors had temporarily managed to overcome their differences that spring to launch an assault on Assad's heartland near the Mediterranean coast. Fearing Assad's collapse, Iran urged the regime's other major ally, Russia, to help. Moscow initiated a major military intervention in September 2015. Though it claimed to be fighting Da'aesh, Russia mostly targeted rebel positions. By 2018 Russian, Syrian and Iranian forces ejected the rebels from all of Syria bar Idlib in the north, ultimately marking the defeat of the rebel cause.

Key to Russia's success were agreements with Turkey. When Russia intervened, it was clear to Ankara that its goal of toppling Assad had failed and instead it shifted to focus on Syria's Kurds. The Kurdish militia backed by the US were allied to the

Kurdish Turkish separatists, the PKK, whom Ankara considered terrorists. Ankara feared the development of a US-backed Kurdish 'terrorist' state along its border with eastern Syria. To prevent this Turkey made several deals with Russia. Turkey lessened its support for some rebel groups, allowing Assad to reconquer their territory, and in exchange Russia turned a blind eye to Turkey's capture of several Kurdish-dominated areas of northern Syria. Turkey eventually carved out three 'buffer zones', in which it pushed all Kurdish forces out and administered through newly created pro-Turkish Syrian rebel groups.

Turkey has also become a key player in the last rebel stronghold of Idlib, alongside the Islamist groups that dominate there. Idlib was the location of the last major battles of the war thus far, in 2020, when Assad sought to recapture the city. While regime forces supported by Russia captured key highways and reduced the rebel territory by a third, direct intervention by Turkey prevented the city from falling, prompting Russian-Turkish talks that resulted in a ceasefire. The outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic weeks

later defused tensions further and, since then, the prospect of fighting has rescinded.

**ASSAD'S SYRIA**

Assad currently controls nine of Syria's 14 governorates, and most of two more. These include all of Syria's large cities and the majority of its remaining population. However, the economy, like many of its bombed-out cities, is in ruins with little prospect of recovery. The death of over half a million people, the exodus of 6 million refugees, and the widespread destruction of infrastructure has left labour, skills and capital shortages. The regime has little money to spend after running up war debts, and nowhere near the \$400bn the UN estimates is needed to recover. Russia and Iran also lack the funds to help and are prioritizing acquiring key Syrian economic assets for themselves rather than rebuilding. The post-war economic crisis has been made much worse by economic meltdown in neighbouring Lebanon and the new 'Caesar' sanctions placed on Syria by the US, which punish any company that deals with the Assad regime. The combined effect of this has been low employment, hyper-inflation and widespread shortages. Life for ordinary Syrians is made worse by Assad and his cronies skimming off what little money does come in, all while maintaining their oppressive ruling apparatus.

The US and EU have said they will only drop sanctions if Assad engages seriously with long-stalled peace talks with the opposition, but the regime has repeatedly shown little interest in these. Instead, Assad sees regional rehabilitation as a route out of economic misery. Middle Eastern governments that once backed the rebels are now warming to Assad. Jordan has reopened its borders while the United Arab Emirates has normalized

ties and hosted Assad in Abu Dhabi, as Damascus woos Gulf investors. Similarly, Syria recently joined China's Belt and Road Initiative, opening the prospect of investment from Beijing. However, neither China nor the Gulf see obvious returns in Syria and still fear US sanctions and the potential for instability. With rebellious southern cities still not fully pacified and the prospect of the war reopening in the north or east, it is unlikely either will offer enough investment. Instead Assad's Syria looks likely to remain poor, autocratic but relatively stable for the foreseeable future.

**THE KURDISH-RUN EAST**

Eastern Syria north of the Euphrates river remains out of Assad's control and is instead governed by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish dominated organization. Only the north of this area is historically Kurdish, with the desert east captured from Da'aesh dominated by Sunni Arab tribes. In theory the local SDF councils that administer these areas have mixed representation of Arabs and Kurds, but in reality the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat – PYD) dominate decision-making. To their supporters, the PYD and SDF are overseeing genuine local democratic government, but to their opponents, including some disgruntled Sunni Arab tribes, they are imposing a Kurdish Marxist autocracy on traditional Arab areas. The area they control theoretically is resource rich: home to Syria's modest oil fields and much of the vital wheat production. However, the SDF lack the expertise to cultivate either effectively and, with access to borders restricted, their economy relies instead on aid and smuggling.

The future of SDF rule depends on the United States. At present the US has retained a few

A member of the Syrian Democratic Forces during a visit to a U.S. Marines security post



“THE FUTURE OF SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES (SDF) RULE DEPENDS ON THE UNITED STATES. AT PRESENT THE US HAS RETAINED A FEW THOUSAND SOLDIERS ON THE GROUND AND, MORE IMPORTANTLY, AIR COVER, TO PROTECT THE SDF, DETER ANY REVIVAL OF DA'AESH, AND KEEP ITS RIVAL IRAN OUT.”

thousand soldiers on the ground and, more importantly, air cover, to protect the SDF, deter any revival of Da'aesh, and keep its rival Iran out. For this latter purpose Washington also backs a small rebel group to hold the al-Tanf crossing on the Syrian-Iraqi border to make Iran's route to Syria through Iraq more treacherous. But US commitment is tenuous. Donald Trump's various attempts to exit eastern Syria along with Joe Biden's withdrawal from Afghanistan and a long history of the US abandoning Kurdish allies has made many in the SDF fearful that eventually Washington will leave. If that happens Kurdish forces are most worried about Turkey, who claims they are terrorists and has already pushed them out of several northern Syrian enclaves. These fears of a US withdrawal enabling a Turkish attack were realized in 2019 when Donald Trump greenlit a Turkish invasion of SDF territory, allowing Ankara to capture several Syrian towns. While the

Kurds have no love of Assad, he represents a better option to Turkey and several SDF leaders have opened back channels with Russia and Assad. Should Washington eventually leave, it is likely that the Kurds will cut a deal to enable Assad to return rather than face annihilation by Turkey. However, as long as Washington remains, they remain hopeful that their experiment in autonomy can continue.

**THE PRO-TURKISH NORTH**

The northern regions beyond Assad's control consist of three thin Turkish buffers and the much larger governorate of Idlib. The three buffers are centered on Afrin and al-Bab in the west and Tal-Abyad in the east. Each now is an informal satellite of Turkey: Turkish currency is legal tender; they are connected to Turkey's electricity grid; and Turkey runs postal, medical and educational services. While they are officially run by Syrian militia that Turkey has trained and armed, in reality Ankara

calls the shots. Turkey's logic for holding onto these regions are twofold. Firstly, to keep Kurdish militia away from its border. For this reason, Kurdish civilians have been pushed out of areas where they once formed a majority, like Afrin. Secondly, Turkey has used these buffer zones to resettle Syrian refugees. In Afrin these were Syrians who fled Assad's reconquest of rebel areas after 2015, displacing native Kurds and forming a pro-Turkish Sunni Arab population. In Tal Abyad, an attempt was made to encourage some of the increasingly unpopular 3.6 million Syrian refugees living in Turkey to relocate back into these 'safe' parts of Turkish-controlled Syria. However, there were limited takers. Turkey seems likely to hold onto these regions for the foreseeable future, and possibly even expand them at the SDF's expense if the US or Russia permits it. It is possible they will be handed back to Assad in some final deal or abandoned by future Turkish governments that care

less about Syria than the current president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, but neither prospect seem likely short-term.

Idlib, in contrast, has a very large population. Before the war barely a few hundred thousand lived in and around the city, but this has swollen to over 3 million – mostly refugees fleeing Assad. Many live in poor shanty towns along the Syrian-Turkish border, surviving on aid. Ankara fears most of these would flee into Turkey should Assad conquer Idlib and so has fought to prevent this. Given Assad and Russia have used the presence of radical Islamists in Idlib to justify its attacks, Turkey has tried to both moderate and displace such groups. However, the dominant group, Hayat Tahrir as-sham (HTS), once an al-Qaeda affiliate, has rebuffed attempts at moderation or control by Turkey and coerced or co-opted the various pro-Turkish rebel forces Ankara has backed to rival it. Consequently, Idlib is now run by an HTS-dominated council, with some input from Turkey, but nowhere near the control seen in the buffer zones. The result is very conservative religious rule which is freer than Assad in some regards but stricter in others.

As elsewhere in Syria much of Idlib's fate rests on outsiders.

Assad wishes to reconquer given it is the last western city out of his grasp but won't attack without Russian support. Even before the Ukraine war, Moscow was loath to attack again, given the heavy costs of the 2020 campaign. Now Russia has even less appetite. Any change in the status quo will likely rest on another Russian-Turkish deal, though neither is much interested in this for now.

**FUTURE CHALLENGES**

Syria's three regions face both similar and different challenges moving forwards. Domestically, each face economic difficulties. Ankara is likely to continue to support north Syria, but economic troubles in Turkey could limit the flow of vital funds and aid. These buffer zones are not economically viable alone and so will remain dependent on Turkey. Eastern Syria has resources but will struggle to exploit them sufficiently and so is also dependent on aid and smuggling, which is a precarious position. Assad's Syria is most vulnerable to economic strife, however. Without sanctions being lifted or alternative revenue or investment found, Assad could

face renewed dissent or even a fresh rebellion. Fear and war-weariness will likely hold the line for now, but not indefinitely.

The threat of Jihadism is another potential challenge. Da'aesh was militarily defeated but its ideas live on, as do many of its followers in hidden cells. They seem too weak to launch an insurgency, but they could take advantage of discontent from Arabs against Kurdish rule in eastern Syria, or from those struggling under Assad's renewed dictatorship. In Idlib the Jihadists are in control and have grown in plain sight. A worsening military or economic situation there might prompt them to radicalize further, possibly transforming into an international terror group that targets the west.

The prospect of renewed conflict is also very real. There are multiple axes across which war could break out. Internally, Assad-Rebel, Rebel-Kurd or Kurd-Assad conflicts are all plausible, though Assad-Rebel clashes over Idlib seem most likely. Externally, some further Turkish-Kurdish fighting is likely, as is fighting between Israel and Iranian forces in Syria. Since 2015 Israel has launched dozens of strikes on Iranian positions and those of its ally, Hezbollah, something that is quietly permitted by Russia to ensure balance between the two regional rivals.

Domestic political changes in the key countries involved in Syria could also shift the dynamics on the ground. The Ukraine crisis could yet impact Russia's approach to Syria. A severe contraction of Russia's economy under sanctions or major military setbacks could trigger withdrawal from Syria, as could the ouster of Vladimir Putin should that occur. Changes in government in Turkey could likewise prompt a shift from Ankara. Turkey's commitment to Idlib and the buffer zones is a personal policy of Erdogan opposed by his political rivals, and they might opt to withdraw should they win the 2023 presidential elections.

Iran is committed to Assad's rule at an institutionalized level so its withdrawal is unlikely, but a severe economic downturn due to sanctions might increase domestic pressure on its leaders to reduce its role. Similarly, an Iranian or Hezbollah-led war with Israel in Lebanon or Syria could alter Iran's calculations. Finally, United States' policy towards Syria look increasingly non-committal and could shift. The Ukraine war means President Biden is unlikely to draw down from eastern Syria soon for fear of handing over an asset to Russia, but in the long term he or his successors are unlikely to commit to a permanent presence.



Scarred city: Aleppo's skyline carries plenty of reminders of Syria's not-too-distant experience of armed conflict