

**Five Years After The Arab Spring: The Current State Of The Syrian
Revolution, The Conflict That Grew Into The Worst Crisis In The World**

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Introduction

470,000 - At the time of this writing, nearly half of a million men, women, and children have lost their lives as the direct result of a bloody war for a country the size of Washington state.¹ This conflict, which started with peaceful protests against the Assad regime in March of 2011 and quickly developed into full revolution by the end of the same year, is now one of the most divided conflicts in recent history. Rebel groups were formed and organized along racial, religious, and ideological lines; each fighting the other, the regime, and the self proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).² The war in Syria is a complex, yet profoundly urgent, emergency which has the potential to decide the fate of the entire region including the Kurdish quasi-state of Rojava, cause harm internationally, and defeat or accelerate an extremely powerful militant Islamic group, which has branded itself as a state; additionally, the war is a very large humanitarian issue for civilians within Syria.

Background: History And Dynamics

Understanding the history of this conflict is required in order to understand the current state of the war. Syria's government was replaced most recently in 1970 in a coup by Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad. Assad installed an autocratic and tyrannical dictatorship in the country. Bashar al-Assad inherited the country after his father's death, he was initially quite popular, especially among the youth. However, after some time, things began to return to the way they once were. In 2011, the Arab Spring reached Syria. Arabs, Kurds and other peoples took to the streets to protest for democracy and other reforms. Similar protests had resulted in the removal of the leaders of Tunisia and Egypt not long before. The protests consisted of entirely peaceful demonstrations and other non-violent uprisings. In March of 2011 however, president Bashar al-Assad decided to end the protests with overwhelming military force. The protesters responded and the

1. Anne Barnard, *Death Toll in Syria War at 470,000, Report Says* [in English], February 2016, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1764608983?accountid=11824>.

2. Christopher Phillips, "Sectarianism and conflict in Syria.," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (2015): 2-5.

peaceful demonstrations turned into violent revolution against the regime.³ In 2013, two years after the fighting broke out, ISIS began to gain ground in the region. That same year, the regime of Bashar al-Assad became the only entity in the country that could rival the human rights violations of the Islamic State when it committed a crime against humanity by using chemical weapons on civilians in Ghouta.⁴

It is important to note the large amount of different groups and factions which have gotten involved in this conflict since these initial events transpired. The Assad regime still stands, but the opposition forces have remained extremely fragmented. Different rebel groups and factions are divided across every line, there are Islamic radicals, even these are engaged in a sectarian war with each other, and other groups organized on various sectarian divides, including ideology and race. Even Kurdish autonomous region of Rojava, one of the largest secular groups of rebels, were initially organized on the basis of the Kurdish ethnic sub-state identity.⁵ Rojava has since become a society built on utopian idealism, embracing direct democracy, libertarian socialism, and confederalism.⁶ The Syrian National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, another opposition group, was formally recognized “as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people” by the United Nations, on May 15 2013, after strongly condemning “the continued escalation in the use by the Syrian authorities of heavy weapons, including indiscriminate shelling from tanks and aircraft, and the use of ballistic missiles and other indiscriminate weapons against population centres, as well as the use of cluster munitions” and all other

3. Faisal M. Rather, Balal Ali, and Shahnawaz Abbas, “From Civil Uprising to Sectarian Conflict in Syria 1” [in English], *Quarterly Journal of Chinese Studies* 3, no. 4 (Summer 2015): 1-3.

4. Radwan Ziadeh, “Revolution in Syria” [in English], Copyright - Copyright Turkish Review Mar/Apr 2014; Document feature - Photographs; People - Assad, Bashar Al; Last updated - 2014-09-26; SubjectsTermNotLitGenreText - Egypt; Tunisia; Syria; Assad, Bashar Al, *Turkish Review* 4, no. 2 (March 2014): 186–195, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1565543007?accountid=11824>.

5. Phillips, “Sectarianism and conflict in Syria.,” 3-4.

6. *The Rojava revolution* [in English], March 2015.

violations of international humanitarian law taken by the government.⁷ Additionally to these three, there are many islamic factions, these islamic factions are no less divided than the other rebel factions. One coalition of non-jihadist Sunni Islamist rebel groups is the Islamic Front.⁸ The Jihadist groups pose a much greater threat to stability in the region, human rights within the country, and the international community. Those in this group which are of particular threat are the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and an Al-Qaeda affiliate called Jabhat al-Nusra.⁹¹⁰

Each of these parties is backed by and intertwined with various international groups and external forces. The government is “backed by Russia, Iran, and the Lebanese Shia Muslim political party and militant group Hezbollah”.¹¹ The Syrian National coalition has the, somewhat useless, backing of the United Nations and legitimacy on the world stage.¹² The Islamic Front has support from, and was created by, Saudi Arabia.¹³ The Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is the most powerful political party in Rojave, has ties to the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK). The PKK itself is a party which

7. *Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 15 May 2013*, United Nations, May 2013, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/67/262.

8. Phillips, “Sectarianism and conflict in Syria.,” 15.

9. “#ISIS: THE LARGEST THREAT TO WORLD PEACE TRENDING NOW.,” *Emory International Law Review* 30, no. 2 (2015): 2, <http://proxy.kennesaw.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=112344132&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

10. Jennifer Cafarella, *Why the most dangerous group in Syria isn’t ISIS*, February 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/26/opinions/syria-isis-al-qaeda-nusra/>.

11. Council On Foreign Relations, “Civil War in Syria,” Council On Foreign Relations, accessed February 26, 2016, <http://www.cfr.org/global/global-conflict-tracker/p32137#!/conflict/civil-war-in-syria>.

12. Glen Rangwala, “The creation of governments-in-waiting: The Arab Uprisings and legitimacy in the international system.,” *Geoforum* 66 (2015): 215–223, <http://proxy.kennesaw.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edselp&AN=S001671851500161X&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

13. Phillips, “Sectarianism and conflict in Syria.,” 15.

is engaged in “a low-intensity war” against the Turkish state.¹⁴ Despite Turkish involvement in the fight against ISIS and the Assad regime, both of which are entities to which Rojava is opposed, Turkey is also violently opposed to Kurdish independence in any form, including the autonomy of Rojava in Syria. “Mr. Erdogan [the current president of Turkey] has said that Turkey ‘will never allow the establishment of a new state on our southern frontier in the north of Syria’ [speaking of Kurdistan as a whole, not just Rojava].” To further complicate the matter, the United States is allies with Turkey and has been providing assistance to Kurdish forces.¹⁵ Unfortunately, Jihadist groups have also seen outside support; ISIS has recruited more than 25,000 foreign fighters,¹⁶ while the al-Nusra Front is funded by al-Qaeda. ISIS, however, has become the primary adversary of nearly every faction.¹⁷

In this way, the conflict is very complex; it is a revolution against an oppressive regime; it is a sectarian conflict between different kinds of radicals as well as more moderate groups; it is a proxy war between international imperialist powers and powerful nations in the immediate area; it is a global struggle against radical Jihad and the rising Islamic State. Each group is involved with multiple sides of the war, the United States, for example, is working together with nearly every other entity in the war on ISIS, it is also working with its ally, Turkey, against the regime - making for a proxy war between rebels backed by the United States and Turkey and government forces backed by Russia and Iran. Despite this partnership with Turkey, The United States has chosen to back Kurdish fighters, putting it at odds with Turkey. Each part of this war is interwoven

14. Nazan Üstündağ, “Self-Defense as a Revolutionary Practice in Rojava, or How to Unmake the State,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 115, no. 1 (2016): 1-2, <http://saq.dukejournals.org/content/115/1/197.abstract>.

15. Sarah Almukhtar and Tim Wallace, “Why Turkey Is Fighting the Kurds Who Are Fighting ISIS,” *The New York Times*, August 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/08/12/world/middleeast/turkey-kurds-isis.html>.

16. Relations, “Civil War in Syria.”

17. Sarah Almukhtar, K.K. Rebecca Lai, and Sergio PeIanha, “Untangling the Overlapping Conflicts in the Syrian War.,” *The New York Times*, 2015, A14, http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/10/16/world/middleeast/untangling-the-overlapping-conflicts-in-the-syrian-war.html?_r=1.

with the next, making for a messy situation for foreign powers that are entangled with allegiances to each other.¹⁸¹⁹

International Threats And Effects: The Rise of ISIS, Relations Between Global Powers, The Stability of The Middle East, The Rise of Kurdish Autonomy, And The Question of Democracy

Any war with so many factions, and so much international intervention will have a global impact. In addition to its grave humanitarian crisis (which will be discussed later), the Syrian conflict has and will continue to have a large effect on the world. There is the grim possibility of a long term caliphate created by al-Nusra or ISIS; there is the gloomy prospect of the Assad regime retaining power; there is, however, a glimmer of hope - there is the hope for democracy delivered by the Kurds, the Syrian National Committee, and other groups who are fighting for freedom, and not for oppression.

The oppressive government of Syria has managed to retain some control in Syria. In 2015, Bashar al-Assad used air strikes to assist ISIS in attacking rebels in the Aleppo, a city in northern Syria.²⁰ Assad is a ruthless and tyrannical man who will do anything to keep his power; he will kill innocents, he will help an organization that has proven to be the only one worse than his own; he will have peaceful protesters massacred in the streets.

Jihadist groups being able to retain control of the nation and build a stable caliphate is the primary threat to the Syrian people, and world as a whole. The Islamic State in particular is the greatest menace upon the world. ISIS is recruiting the most fighters, making the most money, and claiming the most land of any current terrorist organization.²¹ The other powerful jihadist group in the region is the Jabhat al-Nusra Front. This

18. Almukhtar, Lai, and PeIanha, "Untangling the Overlapping Conflicts in the Syrian War."

19. Relations, "Civil War in Syria."

20. Dominic Tierney, "Bashar al-Assad and the Devil's Endgame," *The Atlantic*, September 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/assad-syria-devil-endgame-putin-obama/407635/>.

21. "#ISIS: THE LARGEST THREAT TO WORLD PEACE TRENDING NOW.."

rebel group, backed by al-Qaeda, has been fighting along side, not against, moderate rebels in Syria. “Jabhat al-Nusra will use the legitimacy gained by fighting alongside the opposition to transform Syrian society until it accepts al Qaeda.” Says Jennifer Cafarella, a member of the Institute For The Study of War, where she focuses on the Syrian conflict; “The group is creating structures of governance, like courts and social services, and using them to transform the religious views of Syrian opposition groups and populations.” She claims that al-Nusra is a greater threat than ISIS.²² Both of these Jihadist groups are great threats which must be defeated.

On Thursday, February 25th, a Kurdish activist tweeted a video of a Kurdish female fighter ripping down, and throwing to the ground, the ISIS flag in Shaddadi’s main square and replacing it with that of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).²³ When a guerrilla army is fighting against an entity that treats women and minorities in the way that ISIS does, by enslaving, raping, and torturing them,²⁴ it seems only fitting that women should among those to depart them from this world.

The Syrian revolution has become a proxy war between the United States, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, backing the rebels, and Russia and Iran, backing the regime. Additionally, Turkey and America are at odds; America is supporting the Kurdish forces, while Turkey is violently opposed to them. The war has become, not about stabilizing the region, but about the way in which it will be stabilized. Who will the future government find itself indebted to? Will the nation be more westernized than before? Will it be built upon western ideas like democracy? Syria will eventually stabilize, the question that is yet to be answered is that of the kind of influence that it will be on the region; will it be a force of terror and oppression, or of democracy and freedom?

22. Cafarella, *Why the most dangerous group in Syria isn't ISIS*.

23. @DrPartizan_, *BLACK FLAG DOWN - Kurdish female fighter removes the ISIS flag in Shaddadi’s main square & replaces it with SDF flag*, February 2016, accessed 28 2, 2016, https://twitter.com/DrPartizan_/status/702796142745092096.

24. “#ISIS: THE LARGEST THREAT TO WORLD PEACE TRENDING NOW.,” 1.

The People of Syria: Diaspora And A Human Rights Catastrophe

The other major question is that of human rights. At the time of this writing, the Syrian conflict has resulted in more than 470,000 deaths,²⁵ 4,100,000 million registered refugees, and 6,500,000 displacements. This is, for reference, two percent of Syria's 22.85 million population dead, eighteen percent refugeeed, and twenty-eight percent displaced. The humanitarian disaster, however, expands far beyond these grim numbers. Syrians are still suffering at the hands of the regime, ISIS, the ongoing war.²⁶

Human rights violations hardly started with Bashar al-Assad, his father was known for oppression and tyranny.

The state of emergency, which was in effect between 1963 and 2011, granted the government sweeping powers of arbitrary detention and arrest. The government strictly restricted the freedom of movement, expression, and organization. The single party regime under the hegemony of the Baath Party and Assad's Family carried out gross human rights abuses.

Hafez al-Assad massacred thousands of people at a time in the 80s. Bashar al-Assad continued on the path of his father, his regime, still today, is abusing and torturing prisoners, executing people without trial, and systematically using police power for oppression through "mass arrests, torture, rape, forcible displacement, abductions, forced disappearances, pillaging and destruction of property, degrading or inhumane treatment."

As always, it seems that there is one group which is capable of rivaling the Assad regime's monstrosity. However in the case of human rights violations, that is not so. ISIS appears to be the grater killer because of the way that it propagandizes its violence. The regime, on the other hand, "kills Syrians by air attacks and shelling of civilian areas, blocking humanitarian aid to the opposition-controlled areas or killing the citizens of Syria in detention centers and prisons as a result of torture." It does these things in a much more hidden way than ISIS conducts its public beheadings.²⁷

25. Barnard, *Death Toll in Syria War at 470,000, Report Says*.

26. Relations, "Civil War in Syria."

27. Yavuz Güçtürk, "War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity in Syria" [in English], *Insight Turkey* 17, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 27–40, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1706363147?accountid=11824>.

Despite not being as murderous as the Syrian government, ISIS is still an awful scourge on the people of Syria. The Islamic State “continues to attack schools and hospitals, kill civilians, and displace minorities.”²⁸ This organization has made an internet recruitment campaign out of showcasing their brutality on social media.²⁹ In a similar manner to Nazi Germany, ISIS commits genocide on racial and religious minorities. They keep order through public executions and beatings.³⁰

In Conclusion: Looking Forward

The Syrian conflict is the most pressing crisis of current times, the outcome of this war affects greatly the people within Syria, the immediate region which is threatened by ISIS, Kurdistan, Turkey, the entirety of the middle east, and the whole of the world; the war is a humanitarian crisis, a tipping point for democracy, and a breeding ground for violence. There is no question who is evil in this war. There is no question who is on the wrong side of this conflict. There is no question that those who indiscriminately murder civilians are the adversaries of humanity. There is no question that Assad regime and the Islamic State are fighting for the wrong reasons: for oppression, for terror, for injustice, they are fighting for evil itself. Just as there is no question that these groups’ reasons for fighting are wrong, there is no question that the only way to defeat those fighting for the wrong things and the wrong reasons is to support those fighting for the right reasons. The only way forward is to support the Kurdish forces, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, and other groups who are fighting for freedom. The only way to ensure that barbarians and monsters never again rule Syria and oppress the Syrian people is to put the people in charge of the nation and institute democracy - not by force and coercion from the west - but in a truly democratic manner, by giving the people control of their own destiny.

28. “#ISIS: THE LARGEST THREAT TO WORLD PEACE TRENDING NOW.,” 20.

29. Ibid., 8.

30. Ibid., 2-3.

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