

# The Syrian Civil War

A Simulation by  
Project Delegate



## How to Use This Background Guide

Welcome, delegates! This background guide is your essential foundation for navigating the high-stakes world of the Mongol siege of the Jin Dynasty. To make the most of your experience in this unique and experimental virtual crisis committee, use the guide actively and strategically:

### 1. **Read with Carefully**

We recommend you read the entire guide thoroughly. Pay special attention to the **Origins and Mandate, Committee Background**, and **Special Notes** on historical modifications.

These clarify the narrative liberties taken and help you roleplay confidently within this reimagined version of history.

### 2. **Know Your Character Inside Out**

Locate your assigned character and study their **background, key traits, and strategic goals**. Highlight what makes them influential or vulnerable—this will guide your actions and alliances. Think about how your character's personality aligns with the broader siege scenario.

### 3. **Use the Guide Dynamically**

Don't treat this guide as a script—treat it as a springboard for dynamic storytelling. The **Questions to Consider** will help you develop innovative tactics and prepare counter-strategies for rival factions. Keep notes on possible deals, threats, and betrayals.

### 4. **Be Ready to Adapt**

In this committee, no plan survives first contact with the enemy. Have a few short-term and long-term objectives, but expect crisis updates, unexpected directives, and surprise betrayals to shake things up. Flexibility is key.

### 5. **Virtual Environment**

Unlike typical Model UN sessions, this is a virtual **MUN committee**. While this does, admittedly, come with challenges, it is also a wonderful opportunity to be creative and practice your skills from anywhere. Furthermore, we, as Project Delegate, will aim to make the experience as smooth as possible, while maybe even adding in some surprising twists.



## Key Terms

Not all key terms appear in the background guide, but delegates should utilize any key terms that may apply to their characters' perspectives and backgrounds.

**The Arab Spring of 2011:** A wave of mass pro-democracy uprisings and protests across the Arab world, beginning in Tunisia, that challenged authoritarian regimes and reshaped regional politics.

**Jihadism:** A militant Islamist ideology advocating violent struggle to defend or spread what its adherents see as true Islam.

**The Free Syrian Army (FSA):** A coalition of defected Syrian military personnel and civilian volunteers formed in 2011 to overthrow Bashar al-Assad's government.

**The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS):** A jihadist extremist group that seized large swaths of Iraq and Syria in 2014 to establish a self-proclaimed “caliphate” under strict Sharia law.

**Bashar al-Assad and Hafez al-Assad:** Hafez al-Assad ruled Syria from 1971 until 2000 under an authoritarian Ba'athist regime, after which (until recently) his son Bashar al-Assad has served as president, maintaining tight control over the state.

**Syrian Opposition Forces:** An umbrella term for the diverse array of political and armed groups that have battled the Assad regime since 2011 in pursuit of regime change or reform.

**Gulf Cooperation Council States:** A political and economic alliance of six Arab monarchies on the Arabian Peninsula—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

**Damascus and Aleppo:** Syria's two oldest and most significant cities, with Damascus as the nation's capital in the southwest and Aleppo as its historic commercial hub in the north.

**Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN):** An al-Qaeda-affiliated insurgent group founded in Syria in 2012, later rebranded as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham before merging into Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.



Al-Qaeda: A global Salafi-jihadist network founded by Osama bin Laden in 1988, responsible for coordinating terrorist attacks worldwide, including on September 11, 2001.

Alawite, Shi'i, and Sunni Islam: The three main branches of Islam.

The Arab League: A regional organization of 22 Arab states established in 1945 to foster political, economic, cultural, and security cooperation.

Hazm: A moderate Syrian rebel faction formed in 2014 that received Western military aid before being overrun by extremist groups in 2015.

The Syrian National Council (SNC): A coalition of Syrian opposition groups founded in 2011 to provide political leadership and international representation for anti-Assad forces.

Hezbollah: A Lebanese Shia Islamist political party and militia, founded in 1982 with Iranian backing, that has fought alongside Assad's forces in Syria.

The Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG): The main Kurdish militia in Syria, established in 2011 to defend Kurdish-majority regions and later administer autonomous cantons in northern Syria.

Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK): A Kurdish militant and political organization founded in Turkey in 1978, seeking greater autonomy or independence for Kurds and designated as a terrorist group by Turkey, the U.S., and the EU.



# Introduction To The Syrian Civil War

## Origins and Mandate of the Committee

Erupting in 2011, the Syrian Civil War was originally part of the much broader Arab Spring movement. Earlier that year, democratic protests had spread rapidly throughout the Middle East, most notably in Egypt, Libya, Lebanon, and Syria. The fall of nearby dictators had inspired the Syrian people to rise up against their own authoritarian regime, headed by Bashar al-Assad. In March of 2011, a group of a dozen school-age children had been brutally tortured for writing anti-regime graffiti in their schools in a rural Syrian province. Protests across the country quickly followed, and escalated dramatically after severe pushback from the Assad regime and his secret police.

By July of 2012, the protesting was so violent and widespread that the International Committee of the Red Cross officially deemed the situation a civil war. In the beginning, there were primarily two sides to the war. The Syrian Opposition Forces, composed mostly of Syrian civilians who wished for democratic reforms and extended rights for Syrian citizens. The Syrian Opposition Forces consisted of groups such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and Hazm. These rebels were backed by the Gulf Cooperation Council States (Qatar, Saudi Arabia...), Türkiye, and the US. Fighting these rebels was the Assad Regime, whose goal was simple: maintain power over Syria. Russia and Iran were the primary supporters of the Assad regime.

Through the early years of the war, neither side was able to make considerable advancements. Both were backed by such powerful allies, that a violent stalemate was continuously reached. While the two opposing forces were so focused on annihilating the other, jihadist organizations like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN), and al-Qaeda, were able to enter Syria from the Iraqi border. In the wake of violence and terror, these groups were able to quickly establish themselves in the region. As jihadist organizations, these groups wished for the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate, which meant defeating the Assad regime. These groups, particularly, ISIS, became wildly popular within Syria in 2014 because of their effectiveness in combating the Assad regime.

The US, which had not personally intervened yet, did so in September of 2014, launching several airstrikes against ISIS and similar organizations and deploying troops in the region. However, the US's violent approach only encouraged more individuals to join ISIS's cause and the organization controlled considerable portions of northern Syria and Iraq by its height in 2015.

It was not until 2017, that the combined efforts of several nations were able to relinquish ISIS's hold on Syria and Iraq. Although by that time, the damage was already done. 90% of Syrian people lay below the poverty line and more than half of their population were displaced from their homes.



Still, the war dragged on for several more years, until in December of 2024, a jihadist organization, HTS, made a final siege at Syria's capital, Damascus, sending Bashar al-Assad fleeing to Russia.

### Notes Regarding the Committee

We will be simulating a United Nations meeting taking place in 2014, at the climax of ISIS's rise to power. The goal of the conference is to determine a possible resolution to the ending of the Syrian Civil War. Delegates should read this background guide on the situation leading up to 2014, and look over your country's position on the situation. Then, you will need to do the following:

1. Outline your country's position in three parts
  - a. Your country's past participation and stance regarding the Syrian Civil War
  - b. Your country's goals in the resolution of the Syrian Civil War
  - c. Your country's proposed solution to how the conclusion of the war should occur
2. Prepare with your group for a simulated online United Nations conference

## Committee Background

Since 1971, Syria had been under the rule of the Assad family. First, Hefaz al-Assad, a brutal authoritarian leader that gained power through a military coup. Then, in 2000, after Hefaz's death, his son Bashar al-Assad took control of the government. Although in the beginning of his reign he appeared modernist to Syrians, perceptions quickly changed when censorship and repression of civil liberties were severely implemented. Since the year 2000, Syrians had been living under brutal violence, constant surveillance, a suffering economy, an unemployment crisis, a lack of freedom of expression, rife corruption within the government, and generally awful conditions. However, it was not until 2010, that any major movements had suggested hints of change.

The Arab Spring began in December 2010 and lasted through 2011. It consisted of a series of protests that spread throughout Arabic countries like Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Libya. The protests primarily advocated for expanded democratic rights and civil liberties. In Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya some success was met, further inspiring protests to erupt all across the Middle East.

The Arab Spring movement finally reached Syria on March 15, 2011, when ten school-aged children were arrested for writing the slogan—borrowed from the Egyptian uprisings—“down with the regime,” and other graffiti like “It's your turn, Doctor” (Bashar al-Assad had studied in England to be an ophthalmologist until his brother died in a car accident in 1994, recalling him to Syria. Because of his previous career, many referred to



him as ‘the doctor’). The children arrested were then tortured, and their families were shot while protesting for the student’s release. In the following days, during the funeral, over 20,000 people took to the street protesting non-violently. The protests campaigned for an end to the regime’s brutality, and an improvement in social and economic living standards. These protests rapidly spread across the country, fueled by the massive protests in neighboring countries, and soon reached Syria’s capital Damascus, and major city, Aleppo.

However, their protests were not met with the same non-violent approach. The Syrian military cracked down brutally on these protests, often beating and sometimes shooting at protesters. In the age of technology, these acts of violence were able to be captured by mobile phones, and the footage was smuggled to foreign media bodies. The first example of such violence was on March 18th 2011, three days after the murder of the school children, several protesters were shot dead by the Syrian army. By March 20th, Syrian protesters lit several government buildings on fire. Chaos flowed through the streets.

From mid-March to early-April, protests had been primarily focused on ending the state of emergency Syrian had lived under since 1963. By establishing a state of emergency, the Syrian government had been able to legally limit free expression, public assemblies, and other civil liberties. Inspired by protests in surrounding countries, the Syrian people wished to see an end to such laws, and the implementation desired basic civil rights, including but not limited to: the release of political prisoners and protestors, an end to government corruption, and improved democratic rights.

Additionally, it is important to note the role that religion played in the country’s dynamics. The ruling Assad’s were Alawites, a very small religious minority that holds distant ties to Shiite Islam, while the majority of Syria’s population were Sunni muslims. This religious difference would later in the war be capitalized on by Sunni extremist groups such as al-Qaeda.

However on April 8th, protests shifted to call for an end to the Assad regime, rather than just democratic reforms. The people wanted a complete overthrow of the government. Throughout April, protests spread rapidly throughout Syria’s major cities. Fearing overthrow, Syria’s army quickly cracked down on protestors on April 25th, killing hundreds of civilians through the use of military action.

Foreign countries began to take notice. In the summer of 2011, the US and EU released several criticisms of Assad’s repression of protesters, and even some calls for him to resign. By late 2011, Qatar, Türkiye, and Saudi Arabia also spoke out against the actions of the Assad government. Sanctions were established that targeted the Assad regime. However, Iran and Russia continued their support of the Assad regime.

By June, 1,000 civilians had been killed, 150 soldiers and policemen lay dead, and several thousands of civilians detained in Syria’s prisons. On July 1st, 100,000 people protested against the government throughout Syria.



The first official military force against the Syrian government was declared on July 29th, 2011. It was named the Free Syrian Army (FSA). FSA was created to protect protestors and the anti-Assad movement, while simultaneously aiming to bring down the Syrian government. This military group was primarily composed of defectors and former military personnel. Considered an 'umbrella' group, they claimed leadership over anti-Assad movements, however this proclamation was mostly ignored by local anti-Assad militias. By September of 2011, the FSA was conducting regular attacks against pro-Assad forces.

An interesting tactic by the government was that, throughout 2011, they purposefully released jihadist prisoners from jail, in an attempt to confuse the situation and to sectarianize many of the rebel groups. In the long run, this did not work out well for the government, as many of these released prisoners later joined ISIS, which fought against the government.

Throughout late 2011 and 2012, several peace plans were attempted. Syria allowed the Arab League to send monitors to observe how Syria was stopping violence against protesters and civilians. This plan failed, Syria orchestrated fake scenes for the monitors to observe, and with too great of a risk, the monitors withdrew by January of 2012. Additionally, the United Nations (UN) tried to establish a cease-fire period applying to both the Syrian government and the FSA. It failed, with both sides committing fatal acts of violence. Any plans for peace were considered 'collapsed' by just early June of 2012. The UN team stationed within Syria withdrew shortly after to do increasing levels of violence.

Amid failure in Syria, the UN and Arab League turned abroad for help. In June of 2012 an international convention was held. However, disagreements between US and Russia (who each supported opposite sides of the Syrian civil war) prevented any major progress from being made. Plans for a transitional Syrian government were drafted, however Bashar al-Assad's role in the future of Syria remained vague due to disagreements.

On May 25th, 2012, 108 civilians were executed by the government. This event became known as the Houla massacre. Violence again dramatically increased throughout Syria's regions. On June 1st, Bashar al-Assad promised to crush anti-government protests.

Throughout the month of June, violence continuously intensified. More civilians were massacred, the government began shelling its own civilians, and helicopter gunships were seen in combat against civilians. UN observers who attempted to see the aftermath and assist civilians were met by roadblocks and gunfire; they retreated shortly thereafter.

The previously formed Syrian National Council (SNC), which was created in August of 2011 aimed to remove Bashar al-Assad from power and was officially recognized as the representative of the Syrian people by many UN members, was facing challenges like fighting within the group's leaders in the summer of 2012, that hindered its effectiveness. The biggest source of disagreement was on which rebel militias to fund and support. The SNC also had poor influence on the ground in Syria, and therefore had little effect on its civilians.



On June 12th 2012, the UN officially declared Syria in a state of civil war.

Foreign influence became more obvious throughout 2012. Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar continued to fund and arm rebel militias, now increasingly publicly. The United States began to train a small number of rebel groups to fight against the Assad regime. However their support of rebel groups was extremely limited, out of fear of emboldening an extremist jihadist group. The US's previous interventions of arms had not ended well for the country (The last time the US had directly supplied man-portable air-defence systems had been to Afghan rebels fighting the USSR in the 1980's. The weapons they gave to these rebels then ended up in the hands of the Taliban, and then in the hands of al-Qaeda, who was the group responsible for the 9/11 attacks on the US). Meanwhile, Iran and the Lebanese terrorist group, Hezbollah, shipped weapons to the Syrian government. By late 2012, Hezbollah fighters themselves were sighted fighting along the front lines of the civil war on behalf of the Syrian government. On June 22nd, a Turkish jet was fatally shot down by the Syrian government, sparking tensions between the two countries.

Saudi Arabia was particularly active in the war, which many suspect was due to their rivalry with Iran for political dominance over the region. Iran supported the government, and so Saudi Arabia viewed supporting the rebels as their opportunity to gain further advantage in the Syrian region.

Syrian rebel forces had sporadic successes against the government throughout the summer of 2012, taking several important towns in the Homs and Idlib provinces.

July 15th, 2012: 16,000 people have been determined dead as a result of the conflict, and the Red Cross declares the fighting as a civil war.

A major shift in the war occurred on July 18th, when the Syrian intelligence chief officer, the former Syrian defense minister, the current Syrian defense minister, and Bashar al-Assad's brother-in-law were killed by a suicide bomber in Syria's capital city, Damascus. The FSA took the blame for the attack.

By late July, sightings of fighter jets attacks were reported, mostly in Aleppo and Damascus. Additionally, it was determined that the FSA controlled numerous important checkpoints on the Iraqi-Syrian border.

In September 2012, the role of Syria's Kurdish population was becoming more and more frequent in Syria's civil war. The Kurds are an ethnic minority, the largest one in Syria, and make up roughly 15% of Syria's population. They live primarily in northern Syria, as well as Iraq, Iran, and Türkiye. Roughly 1.5 million people living in the northern regions of Syria are of Kurdish ethnicity. The Kurds have also been historically discriminated against, especially by Türkiye. In early September, roughly 20 Kurdish civilians were found murdered by the Syrian army in northern Syria. The Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) promised revenge following the attack.



The YPG was created in 2011, and was a major component in the Syrian civil war. As a militant group, it was vital in assisting the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—an anti-Assad organization—on the battlefield. The YPG operated mostly in Syria's northern provinces, and was extremely successful during the war. However, the YPG is associated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which is recognized by many nations as an official terrorist organization. Due to this association, both Türkiye and Qatar also recognize the YPG as a terrorist organization. Many other countries have neglected to label the YPG as a terrorist organization itself, with a primary reason being its success in battling more notorious terrorist groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). By many, the YPG was recognized as the best, and one of the only, effective combatants of ISIS. However, this reputation was not relevant until many years later into the war.

In mid-September, Kurdish forces had already retaliated against the government, with the deaths of three Syrian soldiers, and the abduction of several others. In response, the Syrian government had begun arming local tribes with weapons in order to battle the Kurds. Conflict between the two bodies seemed inevitable.

On September 30th of 2012, an explosion from a car-bomb in al-Gharibi killed 8 pro-Assad soldiers, and wounded 15 others.

By October 2012, due the numerous successes of rebel forces, anti-Assad soldiers seized control of Maarat al-Numan, a town that connects with the highway that runs between Damascus and Aleppo, two major centers of fighting, and the two most crucial cities in the fate of the war.

Another ceasefire was organized in late October, but collapsed soon after its idealization on October 30th.

Intense fighting reached Syria's capital Damascus in late October/early November. On October 31st, a Syrian air force commander was shot dead by a rebel in Damascus. Additionally, the government began profuse aerial bombardments of the city, and government fighter jets were spotted attacking civilians. Soon after however, Syrian rebels were able to make remarkable territory gains, and soon seized Saraqib, a town situated near Aleppo which provided numerous strategic military advantages, and Syrian rebels were also able to eliminate several air force units with the destruction of helicopters and other aircraft while they still sat on the tarmac.

By November of 2012, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces were formed, with roughly the same agenda as the SNC. However, the pitfalls that were present in the SNC, still remained within the National Coalition.

This organization also received foreign recognition as the official representative of the Syrian people.



On November 18th 2012, Syrian rebel forces took one of the largest government military bases in Syria, Base 46. On November 22nd, rebels captured another military base in one of Syria's eastern provinces. This gave the rebels virtually uninterrupted access to the Iraqi and Turkish borders. And although successful, both bases were only captured after weeks of ruthless fighting.

In late November, on the 26th, a massive blackout swept through Syria, shutting off most internet and wifi receivers, and eliminating nearly all of the country's ability to communicate with the outside world. It lasted two days. Although the Syrian government blamed it on terrorists, American government official, Edward Snowden, later revealed in August of 2014 that it was actually the unintentional fault of the US' National Security Agency. Hacker's had been trying to intercept Syrian communications, and instead accidentally triggered the blackout.

During December of 2012, the war developed in several different directions. One important milestone being the launch of several Scud missiles aimed at rebel bases. Scud missiles were developed during the cold war by the USSR, and essentially confirm Russia's involvement on behalf of the Syrian government. Additionally, rebel forces seized more of Damascus and captured Harem, a town on the Turkish border.

Russia has a long standing allyship with Syria. Within Syria, they have numerous ports and strongholds that they used to its fullest advantage during the war. From the very beginning of the war, Russia has stood with Syria, although its involvement became more profound after ISIS occupation. From 2014-2018, Russia sold several billion dollars worth of weapons to Syria. Russia also flies warplanes on behalf of the government, deploys Special Forces, and utilizes Russian artillery, tanks, and other military assets for the benefit of the Assad Regime. Additionally, Russia has saved Bashar al-Assad and his government, not only on the battlefield, but also at the diplomacy table. In 2013, after Syria deployed chemical weapons on its civilians, Russia was a key component in convincing Syria to release its stock of chemical weapons, therefore shielding Syria from further diplomatic attacks. In numerous UN conferences, Russia has been the tie-breaking vote in favor of Syria. Much of this allyship has been the result of Russia's rivalry with the US. It is also important to note that without the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Syrian civil war may not have ended yet. Russia was arguably the most important factor to the Assad regime's success in hanging onto power, Russia provided most of the weapons, troops, supplies, money, diplomatic services, etc. However, when the war in Ukraine started, Russia was forced to reorganize its military components in Syria, which resulted in major repercussions for the Syrian government. Although the MUN conference took place in 2014, it is important to note the influence Russia had over the civil war, even if not always obvious.

In January of 2013, radical Islamist organizations, although present in the region since the beginning of the war, began actively participating, altering the course of the war for the remainder of its years. The al-Nusra Front, also known as Jabhat al-Nusra is a Jihadist organization, descendent from al-Qaeda, that operates in Syria. Jihadism is a movement, usually



militant although not always so, that aims to establish an independent caliphate that rests on the fundamental principles of Islamic beliefs. al-Qaeda, Jabhat-al Nusra, ISIS, and several others are all examples of jihadist organizations. al-Qaeda had close ties with Jabhat al-Nusra, and Jabhat al-Nusra was founded as an extension of al-Qaeda in Iraq. However, when the war broke out, Jabhat al-Nusra evolved into an independent Jihadist organization and became an extremely violent player in the war. Jabhat al-Nusra fought on behalf of Syrian rebels, and was a major reason for the delayed response of Western countries involvement in the Syrian civil war. Many Western countries, like the US, wished to assist rebels, but to assist rebels also meant assisting groups like Jabhat al-Nusra, which deterred many countries from providing assistance at all. It was confirmed later by Iraq that many of the weapons carried by jihadist organizations like Jabhat al-Nusra were actually Western in origin.

After weeks of brutal fighting, Jabhat al-Nusra in conjunction with several other rebel groups took control of an extremely influential government military base in the Idlib province on January 11th. Jabhat al-Nusra seized numerous helicopters, tanks, rocket-launchers, etc. before being forced to retreat by the Syrian government.

With the help of these stolen weapons, Jabhat al-Nusra was able to seize Syria's largest dam (which happened to be hydroelectric), and several towns, only a month later on February 11th, 2013. Shortly after, they captured another airbase just east of Aleppo, and another town on the Iraqi border.

Throughout mid-February disputes between the YPG and the Syrian government quickly evolved into deadly bombings of one another.

In late-February, a car bomb exploded in Syria's capital, killing around 50, and wounding 200+. However no groups took responsibility for the attack. The next day, the Free Syrian Army started to bomb Hezbollah, a Lebanese terrorist organization, stationed in Lebanon in retaliation for Hezbollah's bombing of Syrian villages across the border. The two groups spiraled into disputes and ultimatums.

On March 3rd 2013, Syrian rebels seized parts of Raqqa, a large city in Syria, taking control of a major prison. Hundreds of prisoners were freed that day. Although hundreds were killed in the fighting it took to capture the city. Soon after the attack however, the Syrian army was able to retake large parts of Aleppo.

On March 6th, rebels, primarily Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham (another rebel force), officially captured all of Raqqa. This made it the first provincial capital to be controlled by Syrian rebels. Statues fell and the city remained in a state of semi-chaos.

Weeks later on the 18th of March, the Syrian government bombed rebels across international borders. Numerous bombs were dropped on Syrian rebels stationed in Lebanon.



Throughout the rest of March, rebels successfully seized numerous land stretches and towns connecting their territory to the Jordanian border.

In late March, fighting between the Syrian army and the YPG broke out throughout northern Syria. Numerous government soldiers were killed, however several more defected to the YPG. Additionally, YPG forces were able to take control of an important oil field in northern Syria after the government was forced to withdraw due to lack of reinforcements.

In mid-April 2013, the government made a series of advances after finally breaking free of a long-lasting blockade in one area, and then proceeding to complete major resupply operations. The army was able to recapture a town named Abel, which would put rebel groups at a disadvantage in terms of travel. The government also captured another town close to Damascus, Jdaidet al-Fadl, while the FSA was able to seize an airbase outside the city, al-Qusayr.

Additionally, in April, Hezbollah and the government worked closely to recapture a series of cities on the Lebanese border. As part of this offensive, they were able to seize 8 different towns, as well as one named Otaiba which served as a major weapons supply route between Damascus and Jordan. At the same time, in northern Syria, rebels retook another airbase, the Mennagh military airbase, just outside of Aleppo.

In early May, a massacre of over 100 people at the hands of the Syrian army occurred on Syria's coastline. No reporters were able to verify the numbers of what had happened due to severe censorship on the ground. During the war, getting news in and out of Syria was extremely difficult. Many reporters had to go undercover to report events, and to do so was to risk one's life. In the early days of the war, Türkiye was actually one of the rebels most influential allies, because Türkiye had extended several cell towers along the Turkish-Syrian border, in order to expand cell service and wifi coverage well into Syrian territory. This allowed rebels to smuggle information and videos of government brutality out of the country, and to more easily communicate with one another, as well as receive incoming information and reports. The Turkish government also played a key role in the smuggling of USB chips and other information holding devices across the border into Syria, they would often turn a blind eye to transports of such devices. However, despite Türkiye's efforts to increase communication, the massacre in early May has never had any conclusive answers. The Syrian government claimed that they had eliminated a terrorist organization, meanwhile videos released by civilians depict the bodies of several young children. And while no one quite knows what exactly happened, these children were certainly not the terrorist the government claimed to exterminate.

Fighting ensued all throughout Syria in early summer of 2013, with the Syrian government taking most of the successes.



A major turning point in the war occurred on July 12th, 2013. One of the leaders of the FSA, Kamal Hamami, was found assassinated. The ISIS took responsibility for the murder, essentially declaring war against the FSA. Within the month of July, the situation spiraled drastically. Severe fighting broke out between ISIS and the FSA. And shortly after the two groups began fighting, Jabhat al-Nusra began an attack on the YPG and local Kurdish populations. The Kurds were able to hold off Jabhat al-Nusra for the most part, and maintained control of several Kurdish towns, however they suffered severe casualties. In Aleppo province, jihadist organizations held a series of massacres against the Kurds, prompting massive flows of Kurdish refugees to Afrin, a nearby town. Meanwhile, jihadist groups made significant territory gains in the areas surrounding Aleppo and Raqqa.

Throughout the month of August, the FSA, and several other Syrian rebel groups took significant land in Syria's coastal regions, coming just 20 kilometers from Bashar al-Assad's home village. Although the rebels were initially extremely successful, the government recaptured nearly all of the lost land just mere weeks after it was originally captured. Additionally, a human rights organization reported that roughly 200 civilians were killed by rebel groups during the invasion. Roughly 70 were executed while fleeing, and hundreds others were taken hostage.

Throughout all of the fighting, since the very beginning, Iran has been an extremely important ally to the Assad regime. Bashar al-Assad's father, Hefaz al-Assad, had sided with Iran during the Iran-Iraq war in 1981. Ever since this commitment, Iran and Syria have remained close allies. During the war, Iran provided Syria with numerous troops, weapons, and strategic military advice. Over 3,000 Iranian soldiers fought on behalf of the Syrian government.

On August 21st, 2013, the Syrian government committed a chemical gas attack against its own citizens. The attack, which occurred in the suburbs of Damascus, killed hundreds, including innocent women and children. While rebel forces blamed the government for the attack, the government blamed rebel forces. Syrian rebels urged for the involvement of international nations amid the human rights violations. The US, Britain, and France, all condemned Assad's use of weapons, and said they were considering retaliatory strikes against the Syrian government. Meanwhile, Russia, China, and Iran urged the prevention of foreign military intervention. Assad promised to defend Syria from 'Western aggression.' No foreign military intervention came about from the gas attack however. On August 29th, the British parliament tried to pass a vote allowing for the launching of several missiles against the government; the motion failed. However, as a compromise, the US, Russia, and Syria formed an agreement on September 14th that allowed for all of Syria's chemical weapons to be confiscated by foreign entities. By June 30th, 2014, all chemical weapons were considered officially confiscated.

Throughout 2013, non-jihadist rebel organizations began to falter and fail, from a mixture of exhaustion (they had been fighting a war for 2 years by themselves at this point) and in-fighting. In the wake of their loss, jihadist organizations quickly rose to prevalence.



In mid-September, ISIS stole a town in northern Syria, Azaz, from the FSA. Both groups were fighting the same enemy, the Assad regime, which made this open confrontation quite remarkable. A ceasefire was attempted between the two groups that lasted the remainder of September, but was broken by early October. Violent fighting broke out between the two groups.

ISIS became a prevalent player in late 2013. It was created when the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq attempted to combine with Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. After Jabhat al-Nusra declined, fighting broke out between the two groups, particularly in eastern Syria. However, even without Jabhat al-Nusra, ISIS was able to succeed radically within Syria and Iraq.

By mid-October, Syrian rebels had control of a considerable portion of southern Syria, ranging from Daraa (where the protests originally began) all the way to Jordan's Golan Heights. Additionally, Hezbollah fighters advanced within Damascus. Hezbollah fighters captured several other towns nearby, giving the Syrian government an advantage entering November.

On October 17th, 2013, the Syrian government's head of Military Intelligence was found murdered by rebels. Despite the loss, the Syrian government took control of Damascus' International Airport just days later on the 24th.

Throughout October, fighting between Kurdish forces and the YPG left many dead and towns destroyed all throughout northern Syria.

By mid-November, jihadist groups had taken control of several important locations throughout Syria, including Syria's largest oil field, Deir al-Zor. Fighting was more intense than ever, both between rebel forces and the government, and between jihadist and non-jihadist rebel forces.

In December, after several FSA strongholds fell to jihadist hands, the US and Britain stopped all supply aid to the FSA in fear of it falling into the hands of al-Qaeda and those similar.

By mid-January of 2014, the rise of ISIS was impossible to ignore. ISIS had already taken all of Raqqa, while fighting with other Syrian rebels for control over Aleppo. However, they suffered a series of setbacks throughout the month of January, after Jabhat al-Nusra joined forces with other Syrian rebels against ISIS. In late-January, even Türkiye joined the fight against ISIS when they had several aircrafts fire on ISIS stations in the Aleppo province.

In mid-March, even Israel began participating in the Syrian civil war. On the 18th, they began bombing a Syrian army base, in retaliation for a Syrian army bomb that exploded near the Golan Heights, killing four Israeli soldiers, and likely also for the Syrian government's involvement with Hezbollah, an organization that has previously run terrorist operations within Israeli borders.



In early-June 2014, in the midst of a civil war, a presidential election was held in the areas of Syria still controlled by the government. President Bashar al-Assad again won with roughly 88.7% of the votes. An Iranian official reported the elections “free, fair, and transparent” however many Western countries dismissed the election as fake.

In early June, ISIS began seizing massive pieces of territory, using weapons they had seized from the Iraqi army over the border. Throughout the last few months, ISIS had pillaged all throughout Iraq, wreaking havoc and taking abundant weapons and supplies to use in their conquering of Syria. ISIS’s ultimate goal was to establish an independent Islamic Caliphate, which they did achieve to some extent as they announced its official establishment on June 29th, 2014. The caliphate spread across both portions of Iraq and Syria.

Throughout the summer of 2014, ISIS swept through Syria in a mass of murder and chaos. Frequently they would plan and carry out suicide car bombings, in which members of ISIS would sacrifice their lives to drive a bomb-filled car into a busy area. The first murder of a journalist occurred on August 19th, with the death of James Foley, an American. From there, several other journalists were kidnapped, murdered, and tortured. The Committee to protect journalists says that roughly 70 journalists were murdered by ISIS during the Syrian civil war, while more than 80 were kidnapped.

By late August, havoc was everywhere, particularly throughout northern Syria. The UK and the US urged Türkiye to close its borders, as they were being taken advantage of by ISIS fighters to smuggle weapons and soldiers across the border. Türkiye however, proved no intention of closing the border. A suspected reason for this was that ISIS was extremely effective in suppressing the Kurdish populations in Syria’s north. Türkiye had a prominent Kurdish population themselves, and had feared for years that Syria’s Kurdish autonomy would encourage their own Kurdish population to rise up and resist the Turkish government. Some historians suspect that Türkiye kept the border open in order to continue to let ISIS oppress Kurdish populations, and therefore discourage political upheaval within their own country.

Amid this denial from Türkiye, the US turned to the YPG and other Kurdish fighting groups to defend the border.

Throughout the fall, ISIS’s online presence became notoriously known throughout the whole world. ISIS, after taking prisoners who were often journalists, would often post videos on the internet of them executing their prisoners, most often through brutal decapitations.

It was on September 23rd 2014, that the US broke its silence and began airstrikes in Syria, targeting exclusively ISIS, but not the Assad regime. Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, and Jordan all participated alongside the US. The US frequently intervened with the use of fighters, bombers, and missiles. Typically, the US would inform the FSA before launching an airstrike.



Throughout the fall of 2014, the area remained a turbulent region. Türkiye requested an official no-fly zone over Syria that was denied. Meanwhile, Israel shot down a Syrian plane. US and other Western allies spent the fall attacking ISIS and other jihadist groups. The YPG had wild successes against ISIS, regaining significant lost territory as well.

Although ISIS was undeniably brutal and committed terrible acts against humanity, especially innocent civilians, many foreign countries felt divided on their stance with ISIS. ISIS was also one of the few organizations that was actually very successful in battling the regime, although it mostly spent its time battling other rebel groups and Kurdish forces. By this time in the war, the FSA had all but fallen apart, Jabhat al-Nusra was too busy battling another rebel force, Hazm, to bother fighting the government, and ISIS had eliminated virtually all other rebel forces. So, for many countries, ISIS was the one hope of finally toppling the regime. But, this led to a conflicting ethical dilemma amongst the world's leaders; how does one choose the lesser of two evils?

Considering the involvement of some of the world's most powerful countries, as of 2014, Syria enters what some historians refer to as a 'mutually hurting stalemate.' In which, no particular side of the war can win, because all sides are essentially unconquerable. For example, the rebels could theoretically never win, because to do so means that they must beat Russia. Meanwhile, the Syrian government could never hang onto power, because to do so means to defy the US. It is this military theory that is a major factor in why the war dragged on for so long after 2014; no side could sustain any advantage, because how could one side be more powerful than the most powerful nations on Earth. While considering possible solutions, this is an important factor to consider.

## **YOUR GOAL**

Although we are aware of how the Syrian civil war ends, with the seizure of Damascus and the capitol buildings by HTS— a jihadist group with ties to Jabhat al-Nusra— on December 24th, 2024, and with the fleeing of Bashar al-Assad to his allies in Russia, your goal during the conference is to imagine that the conflict remains unresolved, from its status as of the end of 2014. As representatives of your countries, you will spend the conference deliberating and delegating to determine an end to the Syrian conflict as the situation stands at the end of 2014.



## Questions to Consider

- How might the relationship between Israel and Hezbollah affect the outcome of the Syrian Civil War?
- Similarly, how might the relationship between the PKK and Turkey influence the war's end?
- In what ways does this war mirror proxy wars fought during the Cold War? How do these similarities change perceptions of the Syrian Civil War?
- How can the situation in Syria be pacified, but in a fair and just way? I.e: Not just scrambling to find an ending to the war, but establishing an ending that was worth years of fighting for?
- How would local militias and Syrian populations respond to the war's resolution?
- How will your country account for the Kurdish populations in Northern Syria in your resolution?
- How might the situation in neighboring Iraq change the possible outcomes of the war?
- What does your country hope to put in and get out of this situation?
- What is your country's stance towards Bashar al-Assad?
- What is your country's stance towards jihadist groups like ISIS?
- What outcomes does your country hope to avoid or succeed?
- What 3rd party groups –like the YPG or Hezbollah or the Kurdish populations– will your country take into consideration when determining an end to the conflict?

While considering all of these questions we invite you to participate wholly and research thoroughly in Project Delegate's Model United Nations Conference. This background guide cannot provide you a complete nor entirely unbiased history of the Syrian civil war and your country's involvement. The intention of this paper is solely to provide a starting point for research, and we encourage you to do your own research and to discover your own findings.

Good luck, delegates!



## FUTURE AREAS OF RESEARCH TO CONSIDER

- The Cold War (Specifically the proxy wars, and the division of alliances)
- The situation in Iraq during the early 2000's
- US intervention in Lebanon
- NATO intervention in Libya in 2011
- The Arab Spring
- Hezbollah and Israel's relationship
- PKK and Turkey's relationship
- The Kurdish populations, and the stance your country takes towards them
- Syrian geography and in what ways it could affect the war
- Relationship between al-Qaeda and ISIS
- Complicated associations between different Jihadist groups
- Countries participation in the Syrian war through spoken delegation and politics, as opposed to violence

## PRIMARY COUNTRY POSITIONS

The list of countries below is NOT definite; you may be assigned a nation that is not on this list. Please refer to the “Questions to Consider” and “Future Areas of Research” sections to help aid your research.

### **The United States of America:**

The US had not intervened in Syria until the rise of ISIS in 2014. The US sought to dismantle ISIS, and its similar counterparts (Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda, etc), while also removing the Assad regime from power. The Assad regime had been allied with Hezbollah, Iran and Russia. The US hopes that by removing one player, the rest of the other groups (whom the US opposes) weaken in turn. The Assad regime also leans towards a more communist economy, to which the US disagrees. In general, the US seeks to establish a democratic ally in the Middle East, by removing Assad from power. As well as eliminating the ISIS threat in the region. However, this is difficult, because ISIS is one of the only effective combatants against the Assad Regime.

### **The Syrian Arab Republic:**

The Assad regime has perhaps the simplest objective, stay in power. The Assad regime is willing to deploy any methodologies to achieve this goal. Previously in the war, the Assad regime had even dropped chemical weapons onto their own people. Additionally, the Assad regime seeks the end of ISIS, as ISIS is its main competitor over Syrian control. Religion also plays a significant role in Syria vs. ISIS conflict, with the Assad regime consisting mostly of Alawite Muslims (an offshoot of early Shi'i), while ISIS identifies as Sunni.



### **The Republic of Iraq:**

Iraq leaders at this point in history have very little control over the extremely volatile country. ISIS controls most of Iraq as of 2014, and Iraqi leaders main goal is to dislodge the jihadist group. Iraq does not particularly care about the outcome of the Syrian war, so long as ISIS has been eliminated.

### **The Islamic Republic of Iran:**

Iran wishes to see the Assad regime remain in power. Throughout the entire war, Iran had been assisting the Assad regime with the ammunition and manpower necessary to combat Syrian opposition forces. Additionally, both the leaders of Iran and Syria at the time had very similar religious beliefs, and wished to keep such religions in the heads of state.

### **Türkiye:**

Türkiye has a complicated relationship with the Syrian civil war. Türkiye wishes to see the fall of the Assad regime. Throughout the war Türkiye has assisted Syrian opposition forces by providing an open border to them, and a safe place to refuel. However, Türkiye also fears the creation of an independent Kurdish state in northern Syria. The Kurds are a considerably large ethnic minority in northern Syria, and have attempted previously several times without success to establish their own state. ISIS in general seeks to bring an end to Syrian minority groups (Alawites, Christians, Kurds, etc). As a result, Türkiye begins to help ISIS, because the group aligns with their niche goal of eliminating both Bashar al-Assad *and* the Kurdish population in the north. Türkiye provided ISIS with passage over their borders as well as the supplies needed to wipe out the Kurds. Additionally, Türkiye would like to see the end of the war arrive soon, millions of Syrian refugees have flooded into Türkiye and a massive strain has been put on their schools, public transit systems, and general infrastructure.

### **The Gulf States (The Kingdom of Bahrain, the State of Kuwait, the Sultanate of Oman, the State of Qatar, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates):**

The Gulf States generally want the Assad regime removed from power with differing degrees of intensity. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been the most vocal and active forces against the Assad regime throughout the war. Openly, many of the Gulf States provided assistance to moderate Syrian rebels like the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in tandem with the United States. However, it was discovered that Saudi Arabia and Qatar had been privately supplying funds and weapons to ISIS and similar groups, as they were extremely effective in battling the regime. In general however, these states fear the chaos and violence in Syria spreading to their own countries, and would like to see the end of the war arrive soon, preferably with Assad removed from power.

### **The Russian Federation:**

Russia has been an extremely valuable ally to the Assad regime. From the beginning of the war, Russia has been supplying Syria with generous funds, weapons, and soldiers. Syria has always leaned a little more to the communist ideologies, at least in their economy, and Russia fears losing one of its allies in the Middle East. Russia also opposes ISIS, both for ideological reasons



and because ISIS is the Syrian regime's biggest competitor. In the war's resolution, Russia wishes to see the Assad regime stay in charge.

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